

Boys In Exile is the story of an adolescent boy's coming of age in an era of bullying and exclusion.

Boys In Exile

By Richard Duggin

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An aerial photograph of a serene landscape. A calm, dark blue lake is nestled within a vast, dense forest of vibrant green trees. The forest extends to the edges of the frame, with the lake curving through the middle ground. The lighting is bright, highlighting the textures of the foliage and the still surface of the water.

Boys In Exile

A NOVEL

RICHARD DUGGIN

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Print ISBN: 979-8-88531-203-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-204-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Duggin, Richard
Boys In Exile by Richard Duggin
Library of Congress Control Number: 2022908817

1.

The First Cut Is The Deepest

Sheryl Crowe

From behind a scrim of wisteria vines scribbled along trellises between the front porch columns of our house, I watched my young grandson stomp up the sidewalk, coming home from school. Even from this distance I could see his lower lip was blackened with blood. Defeat hung as ragged on him as his shirt, torn away from its buttons and untucked from his pants, revealing the deep V of his pale neck and collarbones. His prostrate shadow, lengthened by the low afternoon sun, groveled along the sidewalk before him, wriggling across the cracks and over the frost-heaved humps in the torn sections of concrete. *Hangdog*. The word leapt to my mind as if I were hearing it for the first time, newly given meaning by his forlorn posture. *Whipped pup*.

I leaned forward in my porch chair, undecided whether to get up and greet him at the screen door onto the porch, or wait. And instantly I felt that ancient heat of anger glowing like fanned embers in my belly. It was the way I always received insult.

The boy, my grandson Elliott Streett II, clomped up the porch steps and through the screen door. Without a look my way where he knew I was resident in the white-slatted Adirondack chair (my place nearly every fair afternoon, sitting in a patch of stippled sunlight with a book in my hand), he let the screen door swing open to the limit of its stretched spring, then whine smackshut behind him as he breezed past me with only a sidelong glance to make sure I was watching. He pushed open the front door, beelining for the foyer staircase up to his bedroom.

“Hey, come back here, Bub,” I called and waited against the silence while he stopped in the entry hall to see if he would be made to come out. He’d been shoved around already, and I could feel that I was just one more force trying to dominate him. “Come on out here,” I called again, more gently.

“What?” he answered sullenly.

“Come show me the damages.”

“It's not anything.”

“I know. But come show me, anyway.”

Another silence—the last bit of resistance to show there was still spark left to rekindle his defiance, if he chose—then Elliott Too (a funnier nickname when he was younger and we could still play with words) slouched onto the porch with his head down, turned slightly away from me.

“Let's have a look.” I cupped his chin in my fingers and turned his face toward me.

The crust of blood on his upper lip was dry, the raspberry scrape on his right cheek darkening toward tomorrow's bruise. He had been crying, but it seemed to have ended before he arrived home. The only evidence were the pale tracks through the smear of dirt alongside his mouth where his face must have met the ground. Despite my impulse not to, I saw him in my mind pinned on his stomach beneath the weight of the other boy, the victor's hands a yoke around the nape of my grandson's neck.

“Let's wash your face off. Looks like it'll all clean up without too much trouble. Anything broken?” I meant his spirit as much as anything else.

Elliott shook his head. I guided him with a hand on his shoulder into the house and to the kitchen sink.

This was another in a run of incidents over the past two weeks where he had been picked on at school. Although he was reluctant, if

not recalcitrant, to tell me or his mother the particulars —especially his mother—it was the first time I had seen real physical evidence of assault. From what little I could gather from him, my grandson's tormentors baited him verbally, or shoved him to the school ground, “horsing around” at recess or gym period.

Most of the time he outfoxed them. He possessed that elusive cunning the slight of stature develop to survive. His best defense was his speed. He was a lightweight on legs longer than his torso, and they propelled him like an antelope. He usually arrived home after school merely breathing heartily. He was as fast as I was at his age. Speed was his genetic compensation for a lack of physical prowess and any inclination to defend himself. He had only to claim the porch steps ahead of them, and the jackals didn't pursue him up the front walk. They stopped in front of the house, cramped forward with arms braced on knees, heaving for air and spitting on the sidewalk. They sprayed callow invectives toward the house, predictably impeaching his genitals or his feminine rearing (he'd been raised by his mother since he was four, when his father, my son, died). If I was present on the porch when he was pursued, I filled as much of the doorway as there was of me, trying to look threatening enough to thrash them should they trespass beyond the front walk. But they don't. It's their game. Their satisfaction was in the chase, holing up their quarry in his home to make their point. Because I knew Elliott must continue to deal with them at school, I didn't go after them. I let them walk away against my instinct to murder the little thugs.

This day, however, Elliott apparently couldn't outfox, outtalk, or outrun them. This day, he had been chased down, probably surrounded, then brought to ground. This time, I grilled him with the journalist's five Ws—*Tell me who did this. What are their names? What happened? Did it start in school? Why do they continue to pick on you?*—prying against his tenacious resistance to reveal details,

either because the sting of his humiliation had made revisiting his defeat more painful than the event itself, or because he adhered to that tribal boyhood code which does not abide a tattletale, a crybaby, a candy-assed pansy—taunts that probably brought on the fight to begin with. “They pick on all the little kids,” was all he’d tell me. “It’s just my turn.”

“There’s no such thing as ‘your turn,’ Elliott. No one waits in line to be beat up. It’s not your lot in life to exist simply for their malicious pleasure.”

“I know it,” he said. “I wasn’t waiting in any line. They just...picked me.”

I knew what that meant.

With a washcloth and antibacterial soap, I sponged at the wounds on his face, cupping in one hand the nape of his neck to cushion the reflexive twist of his head away from the burning touch of the soapy cloth. “Well, not too bad. Doesn’t look like he landed anything solid,” I assured him. “Did you get in any licks?”

Elliott shook his head. “Nothing hurts him. It only makes him madder.”

I tried once more to get the key information. “How many were there?”

“There’s three most of the time.”

“Who? What are their names? Are they the same guys I’ve seen who chase you home?”

My grandson shrugged. “Yeh. They’re just some kids in sixth grade.”

“Why won’t you tell me? Don’t you think it’s about time we see somebody about this? The principal or these kids’ parents or someone? I’ll go with you, or your mother will, if you want. You’re not going to be able to keep this one from her; she’ll see the bruises right away.”

“It won't do any good,” he protested. “It didn't happen on the school grounds, so the principal won't do anything. It was my fault. I didn't see them coming in time, or I could've got away.”

“But I don't understand. Why won't they leave you alone? What's the point in picking on someone—?” I almost said weaker. But I knew all too intimately the hurt in that word. It wasn't weakness that Elliott displayed. If that were so, he'd have gone to the principal or come back with a knife or a gun or whatever kids did now when they'd reached their limits of self-loathing. I was stunned suddenly by the direction my own thoughts were taking. What was the matter with me, to fall into this way of thinking?

“Instead of picking on someone who's *outnumbered*,” I continued.

“They're just like that, is all.” Elliott said this as if he was explaining a deformity on a pet cat, or the snappish behavior of the family dog, excusing their aberrations as the nature of the beast. The clannish part of me was outraged enough in his defense to wring someone's neck, to whale the tar out of someone's hide. But the more worldly part—a prudent side informed by my own ancient wars and treaties, and my experience in a world grown even more restless and violent through its excesses—warned me not to interfere in what were the inevitable growing pains of certain luckless children. This part of me was willing to accept with tenderness my grandson's stoic reticence.

“Well, I think it's about time they picked on someone else. You've already given them what they want. You've paid your dues.”

“They pick on other kids, too. Him and Jeter pick on little kids a lot. Those morphs he's tight with egg him on.” There it is, I thought. The *him*. The ringleader. There's always a him; the others are merely henchboys. Cronies. Homies. I liked my grandson's term: morphs.

“They call me Runt,” Elliott said.

“My nickname was Squeaker,” I replied.

“Huh?”

“The same guys—they never change, they never grow up. When I was in school they called me Squeaky or Squeaker, because I was so small. I was a 'pipsqueak.' Squeaker Streett. It stuck with me all the way through high school.”

“Squeaker?” He laughed, then winced when the cut on his lip cracked.

Elliott Two was eleven years old, in fifth grade at a public school three blocks from his house which my son and daughter-in-law bought before he was born. A house with a mortgage considerably over their means, just so he could walk to school in a secure middle-class neighborhood. Now he had fallen into disfavor with someone who had singled him out for ridicule and example.

He was one of the tormented. The sort of boys who picked on him were, in my experience, loutish kids broken early by abusive fathers and nagging mothers until what was left in them was lean animal meanness. I'd known such kids from my own childhood, when I was not much different in size and spirit from my namesake. I had come to believe they were always with us, probably always would be. They seldom matured with much difference from how they were molded by their upbringing. At least, that's what my career as a newspaperman had shown me from my early assignments on the police blotter and courthouse beats, and later, on the City Desk, sending other reporters out to cover the overnight crimes. Over and over again. This was not new or modern behavior. I had both been victim to it and, I must admit, participated in it as well. “And the beat goes on,” Sonny and Cher would later voice it.

A memory lit up from my junior high school years. There were kids then, too, who picked fistfights for no reason at all except to fight. No retaliation for an insult, no revenge for a girlfriend bird-

dogged or parentage maligned: all it took was for one kid to “choose” another to fight after school. Two boys passing in a crowded hallway between classes, and one might say to the other, jabbing a knuckle into his shoulder, “I choose you, sucker. After school, down by the goalposts.” That's all it took. That and a few hours for the word to get around school so there was sure to be a crowd to watch. The one chosen had to show up; there was no talking your way out of it. If you didn't show, if you skipped out another door or got yourself put on detention to avoid meeting your challenger, you were branded. Chickenshit. Pussy. Fag. And you still got the bejesus beat out of you at the first opportunity, just for having been chickenshit. There was more honor in defeat than in running away, even if you just stood there and didn't defend yourself.

Naturally, I never challenged anyone to a fight. I lived in dread of the day I might face a similar challenge, without the slightest hope of defending myself, let alone winning. “What's the point?” I remembered asking a friend of mine, Frank Mancuso, who was a fighter. “It's for the Neanderthals, morons.” Nevertheless, because my friend was someone else's arch enemy, in my last year of junior high I was “chosen” twice, both times by the same guy, a crony of my friend's enemy.

Richard Pindar. I remembered the name. They called him Pinhead. A boneheaded kid, not a whole lot bigger than me, thank god. But, as the Mafia would put it, he was looking “to make his bones” to keep tight in the group he ran with. The first time he chose me, Pinhead Pindar assumed we were going to walk all the way down to the football field, as was the custom, to fight underneath a set of goalposts. I couldn't imagine traveling that awful distance away from the sanctuary of the school building just to get the snout beat out of me. I wanted to get it over with, and I held no illusions I would prevail. I pushed ahead of Pindar on the stairs going out of the

building and slammed open the big pneumatic-hinged door first, letting it swing back on him. He was a couple steps behind me. As he grabbed the closing door and pushed it back open, I wheeled around with a doubled fist and caught him unawares with a roundhouse right into his nose. And I kept swinging wildly, without pause, never letting Pinhead recover, until a teacher came out the door and broke us up and we both got detention.

The second time, wise to my tricks, Pinhead arranged to have us both “escorted” to the football field by our friends, acting as seconds. I had two friends I could maybe call buddies. But the only one who showed up with me was Frank Mancuso, whose archenemy was the reason I was being called out by Pinhead. Once in our positions between the goal posts on the north end of the football field, a ring of rubbernecks and partisans surrounded us. The “rules” for these fights required a coin to be tossed in the air to determine, heads or tails, who got first punch. I said, “I call heads.” A third party tossed the coin in the air, and as it rose and fell, Pinhead followed it with his eyes and then when it hit the ground he leaned forward to read whether it was heads or tails. I connected with an uppercut that sent him reeling onto his back. “Heads,” I said without ever looking at the coin on the ground. “I win.”

Frank Mancuso shouted, “Way to go, Squeaker!”

I’ve never excused cruelty. I was shamefully familiar with its impulses. Causing injury to promote suffering seemed an exclusively human trait. I learned this from a wise man years ago, when I was not much older than Elliott Two. That man was the nature counselor at the summer camp to which my parents had packed me off in order to shield me from the danger of polio.

In nature there were pack animals like the timber wolves, the counselor taught us. They often drove the weakest member away, denying it any part of the kill. There were species that excluded or

killed the runt of the litter when there wasn't enough to feed it along with its stronger siblings. There was the pecking order among fowl, and the indolent bat-and-bite play of domestic cats before they killed their prey. But those did not seem to be choices such animals were free to make. Those were automatic transactions propelled by instinctive genetics of natural selection. They were thoughtless acts. Only humans felt the unnatural urge to protect the crippled and weak among their species while simultaneously gaining pleasure from tormenting them. Thus my Woodlore counselor at Camp Hemlock counseled us.

I poured Elliott a glass of lime Kool Aid—still his favorite after school drink— and retrieved some raisin oatmeal cookies from a piggy-head cookie jar Jen, his mother, filled the night before. The boy settled into the bench at the breakfast counter in the kitchen and began eating enthusiastically, ignoring the discomfort of passing the rough-textured cookie over the swelling of his lip. Soon he was chewing away and gulping his Kool Aid just as he did nearly every normal day.

I settled into the breakfast nook bench opposite him. “You shouldn't protect these guys,” I pursued. “I want you to go see the principal. I'll go with you. She should keep them away from you. She can have them suspended.”

“No,” my grandson countered. “I don't want to tell on them.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't want them to get into trouble. They'll just be mad at me, and they'll never be my friends.”

“They're not your friends now. What makes you think they ever will be?”

“Most of the time, they're okay,” he said.

“What kind of friends are they that treat you like this?” But I knew the answer even before he shrugged to show that the

relationship was way too complicated for him to explain or me to understand. It wasn't a lack of understanding that made me question him: I was pressing to discover just how much of myself I might recognize in my grandson's rationalizations.

"They're sort of my friends. Kevin likes me, I think. And Jeter and the others mostly just tease me. I wouldn't have got hurt today if I hadn't dissed them."

"Dissed them?"

"Yeh. I smarted off," Elliott said, using the expression I sometimes used on him when he got too lippy.

"Well, good grief, what do you think they've been doing to you? What sort of respect have they shown you?"

Elliott clucked, and his eyes dropped, searching the floor. I could almost see his mind working, trying to find some way to explain to his dimwitted grandfather how the rules work when you're on the outside and desperately want to be in.

"I don't want to get them in trouble. I like them. It was just this one time."

"Elliott, these kids have been chasing you home for at least...how long? Three weeks? I've seen it myself. They stand out there in front of your house and call you names."

"It's just 'cause I can beat them home," he said through a sly grin. "Grandpa, I'm not afraid of them. They won't hurt me for real."

"Said the lion tamer just before Simba bit his head off."

Elliott seemed puzzled.

"So, is this some kind of initiation, then? Are you trying to join some club?"

"Initiation?" He frowned. "Sort of, I guess."

"And do all the other members go through the same hazing? Do all of them go home with bloody lips until they've passed their test?"

"It's not like that."

“No, I know it's not. The fact is, some kids are privileged, and some are not. Some kids, like some adults, know how to make friends immediately, to form cliques, to kiss the ass of the bull elephant in the herd.”

Elliott laughed at this.

“It's only outsiders they deal grief to,” I continued. “And nobody knows how you get to be an outsider. All you know for sure is, if you're on the outside, you get to thinking that maybe, just maybe if you put up with the discrimination long enough you'll magically get to be an insider.”

Elliott shook his head and shrugged uncertainly. It was obvious he wasn't in a mood for my amateur psychology. I drew a breath to regroup. “Help me understand.”

“They're older kids,” he said. “And really, they're sorta cool. They do all these crazy things out on the playground that drive the teachers and the other kids whacko, and...well, they're just totally bad.” By which, of course, he meant totally good, cool, rad, sick—guys you'd want to hang with because there's always the thrilling possibility for trouble. He beamed at me while he spoke. His lip was split, his eye was blackening, but he was smiling at his grandfather in admiration for the people who had done this to him.

“And you want to be like them?” I said.

“Well...? Wouldn't you?”

The familiarity in the question drew me up short.

“I'll tell you what,” I said, “you go on upstairs and get rid of that torn shirt. And take a shower, clean off the dirt before your mother gets home.”

“Okay.”

“And wash your hair, there's mud in it.”

“Okay.” Elliott slid off the bench and grabbed a couple more cookies from the piggy head on the counter. “What are you going to tell mom?”

“What are *you* going to tell mom?”

“That I fell off my bike?”

He looked guardedly at me to see if Grandpa was willing to back him up in a lie.

“You go on up and shower. When you come back down, I have a story I'll tell you about your grandpa and what happened to him when he was your age and wanted to be in with the cool guys.”

“Oh sure!” Elliott was grinning now. “When everything cost a nickel?”

“No, it's not that kind of story.”

“When you walked five miles uphill to school. Both ways. Every day. In the snow.” Elliott was pouring it on, grinning.

“Get the lead out, smartass. No wonder they cleaned your plow.”

Elliott raced off to the bathroom upstairs and I returned to my chair—“Grandpa's chair”—on the front porch. But not to pick up the reading I had been doing. Instead I tried to resolve the anger still in me over my grandson's willingness to suffer humiliation so he might win acceptance.

Elliott Street II—named by his father after me, the first Elliott Streett—was coming into his legacy: whoever they were who tormented him had brought him down for the sole offense of his small stature and concessionary nature.

My son Mark, Elliott's father, was that way, too. Lovers, not fighters, we used to joke, because neither of us would apply to himself the word we loathed: chicken. But Mark was dead, killed by his own caution in an automobile accident seven years ago when his shoulder harness caught him across the throat and held his head angled for the fatal punch of the airbag that broke his neck. Like me,

and like his son named after me, he was too short for the myriad appliances engineered to protect the “average” American against traumatic injury.

I had been living with my grandson and his mother, Jennifer, since shortly after Mark's death. I helped with her mortgage payments and looked after the boy each afternoon until she returned from her job downtown. It was to be a temporary arrangement, a few months tops, to help her get her affairs settled after Mark died, until other arrangements for Elliott's care could be made, because she had to keep working to make ends meet. But after six months passed, by mutual agreement and need, I sold my own house in Kansas City, and I'd been up here in Nebraska ever since. There was too much room in my old house for one person, anyway, and I was utterly alone as well. My wife Elizabeth, Mark's mother, had passed away twelve years earlier of one of the Big Three they say will get us all if we are to die of natural causes. Hers was a failure of the heart—a massive “coronary episode,” the medicos euphemistically called it—perhaps a better fate than the other two possibilities, cancer or stroke.

So I'd looked after Elliott II each day while his mother was at work. He was four when his father died, and I was the closest thing now to a father he'd had, for which I pitied him enormously.

For forty years I was a newspaperman on the *Kansas City Star*, a profession that made my own mother and father proud, their sacrifices for me vindicated in the career I landed. Ernest Hemingway got his start as a chronic pessimist working for the same newspaper much earlier in my century, before he became part of that disaffected generation who thought they had discovered the answers to life's chaos as existentialists and nihilists. Before war and technology and economic forces got too complicated for even that teleological, quasi-philosophy to explain definitively.

I retired some years ago, but I'd kept abreast of what was going on in the world, out of habit rather than real interest. Of late, I'd been reading more reports in the papers or on television about the despondent acts of young people so desperate to find acceptance they were willing to kill one another to achieve it. Where did that reasoning come from? their baffled parents asked. In a country of unparalleled prosperity, why did so many of its children seem utterly devoid of hope for their future that they would destroy themselves before their lives had even begun?

I had my own notions about that.

Violence and despair in America's youth was no anomaly of a single misguided generation. It had been there a long time, growing almost inevitably out of that era my own generation liked to think of as the "innocent years" of the post-war 1950's. The payoff for all that deprivation our parents endured in a Depression and World War was supposed to have been a prosperous and safe future for their children. The despotic bullies of hunger and war had been sent packing. Fascism was dead. Communism would be brought to its knees, they prophesied (unless, as some skeptics argued, we blew ourselves to oblivion to achieve it), and it largely came true with the demolition of the Berlin Wall and breakup of the Soviet Union. Democracy and Capitalism were happily wed and raising a new world population of American dreamers. Trust, believe, they told us. Don't fear nuclear holocaust. Don't fear the new despotism of corporate wealth and political power deepening like a cavernous sinkhole beneath the thin crust of that American Dreamscape. And as kids in that time, why wouldn't we believe? Take shelter under your desks or in the hallways at school when you heard the sirens blow, and you'd survive and prosper. Believe, trust. The only thing that could threaten your entitlement to your golden futures was self-doubt.

Now, what was happening with my grandson had brought back faces, images, events from my own past. I was thinking again about Billy Waite and Peter Stang. I hadn't thought about them, or that summer at Camp Hemlock, for years. My life had followed its natural course from school to job to a family of my own. The lessons of that summer—what lessons a twelve-year-old boy could have owned up to back then—had been securely woven into the fabric of the ethics I had come to live by. I believed I had successfully winnowed and compressed my past into the baler of my own history, stored them in memory's haymow to become the cud for my latter days when I would chomp on the silage of my productive adult life. Was this reflection of myself in my grandson, then, evidence of my unstoppable slide down the long slope into winter?

Peter Stang, Billy Waite, Dan Walker, Jim Bucher, Malcolm Petty, Chris Fowler, Drew Dalton, Mark Axelrod, Mike Campanella. And me, Elliott Streett. We were the ten boys in Timber Wolf cabin at Camp Hemlock that summer of 1955. I was surprised after all the intervening years that I could still match their names with the faces in a photograph taken of us in front of a broad granite boulder outside our cabin—a camp photo that I'd packed with me through four homes, two colleges and one profession, at the bottom of a box of old black-and-white pictures from my youth which I'd not looked at since, until after my wife Elizabeth died and then our son Mark died, and I'd come north to live with Jen and Elliott II.

With our backs to the face of the boulder, shoulders pressed to the stone, arms hanging uniformly at our sides, my cabinmates and I looked like a family of greenhorns posed at the beginnings of a dude ranch excursion. Only I, at one end of the line, leaned jauntily on one arm, the flat of my hand on the stone surface, one foot crossed over the ankle of the other in a stork-like stance, as if I were the head wrangler and the other boys in the picture were visitors to my rock.

All of us were dressed in the white T-shirts with the hemlock tree logo and the camp's name silk-screened in green ink on the front. We all wore shorts and Keds high-top sneakers, and sported summer crew cuts. In the picture, also, was our cabin counselor, Hank Barrett, squatting at the other end of the line, his adult legs as muscular as a soccer player's. Less than two months after that picture was taken I was to see Hank crying openly in the Thunderbird amphitheater above the camp mess hall, without self-consciousness, during the memorial service for one of our own.

I had forgotten most of the boys I went to school with in my hometown of Wellesley, Massachusetts. Only a few names, and fewer faces, survived the years since I moved away from Wellesley to attend college in Michigan, then Iowa, and from there to Kansas City where I would become a journalist and chronicler of the stories of other people who, for the most part, were characters in the personal columns of my bylined articles written during the latter days of my career. The boys from my summer at Camp Hemlock would have been forgotten, too, if it hadn't been for two of them—Peter Stang and Billy Waite—and the tragic drama that played out that summer and had been reprised over and over in camps and schools and on the streets of our cities from that century into this one.

2.

Standing At The Crossroads

Elmore James

Twelve years old, three months shy of thirteen, when my parents, Derek and Emily Streett, exiled me to the White Mountains of New Hampshire for eight full weeks in the summer of 1955. But it was November of 1954, seven months before the end of my sixth grade at Marshall L. Perrin School, when my mother first saw the boxed advertisement in the *Wellesley Townsman*. The ad promised pure country air scented with balsam pine on a “clear and sparkling” lake. It offered “a blend of sports, outdoor skills and an appreciation of nature in a setting where boys thrive and grow in a wholesome environment that fosters teamwork and self-confidence.” As an added benefit, there were “lifelong social skills” to be gained from living and sharing with boys one's own age from all over New England and New York.

She was on the phone to them that same day, while I was still at school struggling with arithmetic and social studies. It was her intention to distance me from the specter of polio, which for several years held everyone in my hometown in thrall to their darkest anxieties. In 1953 alone, when I was ten years old, two Needham boys had come down with it, and there were five cases in Natick, Weston and Chestnut Hills, all towns around Wellesley, and a dozen more in Cambridge and Boston. My mother fixed a map of Massachusetts on a bulletin board in the basement, on the wall beside our Ping-Pong table, and put colored pins in the towns where cases had been reported. It was like a battle map, and her histrionics had me worried, too. Morses Pond, the only public beach in town, was closed all that summer as a precaution against contagion. My mother

may have been convinced polio was God's next plague sent to take the children, and because no one really understood what brought it on—was it in the air? in the water we drank or swam in? in the touch of another's skin? — there was the gloom of inevitability that its shadow would pass over us. It was coming. It was near. In the next town, on the other side of town, down the block!

“The woman said there are a lot of returnees to the camp each year,” she told my father at dinner that night. “You have to get your name in early for 'empty beds,' is what she told me.”

“What does it cost?” my father wanted to know. He was only half listening, not yet alarmed as I already was by the implications of what my mother was suggesting. She had prepared my father's favorite meal—lamb chops and baked potatoes—perhaps as a way of buttering him up, greasing him into concurrence with her plans. That was not hard to do. He was an easy-going person, a man of endless concessions where my mother was concerned.

“They have daily recreation periods, even if it rains, and they teach the boys all sorts of crafts and skills. Woodworking, ceramics, tennis, boating, swimming. There are campouts and softball games. Loads of things to keep young boys occupied in clean fresh air.”

“Yes, but how much?” my father asked again, dipping a forked wedge of lamb into a pat of mint jelly. “Do we even know what it costs yet?”

“Reasonable. Very reasonable, when you compare it to the expense of an iron lung,” my mother said in that flat tone she often used when she wanted to let you know there could be no argument against her wishes.

I knew what an iron lung was. March of Dimes posters, *Life* magazine, the rotogravure sections of Sunday newspapers pictured children—blonde-haired little girls or dark-haired boys, I seemed to remember—entombed in huge stainless steel cylinders, only their

cherubic faces free of the machine, as if they had been stuffed into a giant roaster like I imagined the witch's oven in "Hansel and Gretel." The pictures often showed a mother or a nurse sitting by the stricken child's head, reading a storybook or laying a washcloth on her brow. Those images of children my age immobilized in their iron lungs stimulated my phobia for tight spaces and my dread of being powerless.

I read *Tales From The Crypt* and *Weird Tales* comics back then, and there were graphic stories in them of people buried alive in coffins, some of them clawing their way through lid and dirt while never quite reaching the air above—only a rigor-mortised skeletal hand sticking up through the soil like the leaf-bare branch of a tree. But I knew infantile paralysis was no cartoon fantasy. Polio was a splinter of angst that festered under my family's skin. Besides the threat of nuclear holocaust obliterating us all in a single apocalyptic burst, and the threat of Communism with its sneaky rhetoric taking over our government, our way of life, our freedom to think (according to my father), polio was another invisible destroyer whose devastation was evident only after it was too late to do anything to stop it. It was like rabies in that way. It was like gamma rays, invisible in their deadly work.

Still, I knew my mother's argument for sending me away to camp was not a reasonable one. She was using fear to influence my father's support of her decision, and she just wanted an excuse to send me away from home and my friends.

"None of the other kids are being exiled," I said. I had recently read the word at school from a *My Weekly Reader* article on the American and French Revolutions. I liked the sound of it. *Exile*. It was sharp and surgical, and it suited my notion of what my life sometimes felt like in my own house under the rule of my

increasingly old-fashioned parents. My home was Elba. But being sent away from there to—where? what? Siberia?

My mother moved right past it. “You’ll have fun galore up in the lovely cool mountains on a big clean lake to swim and boat, while your friends here are miserable with boredom and the heat. There is absolutely nothing constructive for young people to do in Wellesley in the summer.”

“There’s plenty of stuff to do,” I insisted.

“Not that I’ve seen,” she said. “There’s only opportunity to get into trouble or contract a terrible, devastating illness.”

Desperate for help, I turned to my father. “Dad, don’t let her put me into some crummy exile camp. Please?”

My father could only shrug hopelessly. He put up no argument against her at all. Because he was away from home often himself, and for long periods of time in his job as a traveling salesman for a company that made men’s hats, he deferred to his wife in all things regarding my rearing. When he would not speak up for me, I had to speak up for myself.

I, too, reacted out of fear, but my fear had merit. I feared leaving the safety and comfort of home, leaving my friends, more than I feared contracting polio. What my mother didn’t understand, and I had no way of articulating reasonably, was that summers in Wellesley were essential to me precisely because there was nothing “constructive” for me to do. I could hang out and bum around with my buddies—what few I had as that short, skinny kid who wasn’t allowed by his parents to do anything really fun and who was scorned, or worse yet, ignored by the bigger kids in school. I craved and plotted ways to do nothing at all constructive with my cronies. Just goof off. There was a numbing bliss to bumming together in the sticky heat of those indolent summer days. Riding our bikes all over town. Passing a football around. Playing street polo on bicycles with

croquet mallets and a softball. And swimming in the tepid waters of Morses Pond before they closed the pond down last summer because of the polio threat. These simple redundancies made one day seem like another. In this way the summer moved slowly, with its crustacean boredom, until returning to school in the fall was something I looked forward to.

Because we were all growing like germs—our emotional selves metamorphosing almost seasonally in those years—it was important to maintain my friendships over the summer to carry me and my few hard-won friends uninterrupted into the new school year. If I were to leave town, by the time I returned in August everyone I had left behind could have changed, and I would be an outsider, having to relearn who hung with whom now, who was or wasn't the cool kid any longer. The few boys I knew who went away to summer camps or lake cabins with their parents were rich kids, pinheads and pansies who still wore shorts instead of dungarees even in fifth and sixth grades. But there was no way to explain this to my mother. All the guys I knew—the ones who were cool about stuff—wore dungarees.

One of the kids in my class at school, Brian Gordon, went away every summer to a family home on Martha's Vineyard. But my mother was partly right about him. I had to concede that Brian wasn't a pansy, technically. He was athletic and intelligent, but still different, detached and self-assured like some kids were who came from money. Yet he was one of the most popular boys in school with lots of girls—some in sixth grade—mooning after him. Behind his back we called him Little Lord FartLeroy.

But on this evening at the dinner table in November, 1954, looking desperately for ways to crack my mother's impervious resolve, I struck on the notion that her desire to be rid of me for eight weeks in New Hampshire was as much for the prestige of it all as it was to allay her fear that I would catch polio, and I said as much.

“You just want to send me to camp because Brian Gordon goes away for the summer to Martha's Vineyard.” I pronounced each of the proper names mincingly to show my disdain for both Brian and his summer retreat.

She began carefully cutting a piece of lamb chop on her plate in that maddeningly fastidious way she had when she knew she had the upper hand. “My only concern, Elliott,” she continued, “is for your welfare. Think of all the new friends you'll make at camp. Think of the interesting boys you'll meet from other places.”

She had struck the rotting lid over my buried anxiety, unearthing it in an instant. It was a fear I thought I had vanquished through the early years of grade school that it took to win the protective friendships of those kids who were mean enough to hurt me if they thought I was too smart, too small, too rich.

“I don't want to make new friends. What's wrong with staying here with the kids I like? I don't want to meet anyone new. I like my old friends just fine. They're good guys.”

“Hardly,” she said. With the tines of her fork she pricked the piece of meat she had cut.

“Why do you think meeting new kids is good for me? It could be really bad, too. You don't know where they're from or anything. It'll be like going to Back Bay Station and meeting a bunch of strangers waiting for the trains. I could catch a terrible disease from one of them; I could get beat up, for crying out loud.”

“Now you're being absurd,” my mother said, and, squaring her chin, she placed the meat in her mouth. But I saw her blink twice.

I knew the thought of Back Bay Station in Boston was repellent to her. She hated Boston, its dirty streets and crowded conveyances. “That city is a breeding ground for pestilence,” she often warned. But she was always willing to risk shopping at Filene's or Jordan Marsh,

and she routinely went “into town” to see an opera or stage play with the crones from her bridge club.

“Don't you worry,” she went on, having pointedly chewed and swallowed her food first, “when you get home, your friends will be waiting right on the same street corner where you left them.”

Only, I knew no one would be waiting for me. This was to be our last summer together as grade schoolers at Marshall L. Perrin. In the fall we would all be entering Wellesley Junior High School, that sprawling brick building half way to Wellesley Hills, where we would have to take the city bus just to get there! All the kids from the sixth grades in the other Wellesley grade schools would be bunched together in seventh grade. I would be thrown in with whole armies of new kids, and my handful of pals from Perrin that had taken me so long to build to the point where I could trust they wouldn't pick on me anymore would be split up and lost to me inside the maze of classrooms there. Things were going to change drastically. I needed this one last summer where everything was comfortable and familiar to me, where everything was safe and known.

“It wouldn't hurt to take a little time and think about this,” my father spoke up finally. “It's only November, after all. There's time to consider everything that's involved in sending him off to some place in another state when it's obvious he doesn't like that idea.”

“If there's one thing we don't have, it's a lot of time to consider what should be obvious to anyone with any sense,” my mother replied. “The camp lady said these spots for new campers fill up quickly. If we don't act soon, the opportunity will pass us by. This plague that kills and cripples children is at its most virulent during the summer. They had to close Morses Pond last year, and I wish they'd just close it down for good. It's such a dirty little pond. You'd think the town of Wellesley would be able to afford a municipal pool that was cleaner than that place.”

“I don't have to go to Morses Pond,” I sprang back in. “I could just hang out around here.”

“That's not the point. I'm not letting you go the Morses Pond this summer, regardless. The point is, this is not a healthy climate for any child in the summer. You need to be in a place where there's clean fresh air and clean water.”

For my mother polio had become the surrogate for all catastrophes—from malevolent virus to mortal violence—that lay out there waiting, invisible but real, ready to snatch away the lives of children. Scarlet fever, falling from high places, spinal meningitis, being crushed by a car because you didn't stop to look before leaving your driveway on a bicycle, drowning in Morses Pond from cramps because you didn't wait an hour after lunch. Nuclear war. Any war. Playing war in your back yard and falling out of the tree you were perched in as an Army sniper. All the ways there were to maim or kill children she had distilled into her dread of this one disease, polio. Furthermore, she was convinced that all tragic events afflicted only communities with large populations; there was no evidence she had found that tragedy visited anyplace where there was fresh air and clean water.

“You should consider yourself very lucky you have a father who works hard so we can afford to send you to such a beautiful place,” she said.

“How do you know we can afford it?” my father replied with a sardonic chuckle. He spread a dollop of mint jelly on the bone of his lamp chop before lifting it with his fingers to his lips to gnaw the last tidbits of meat from it. My dad held to the belief that quiet humor could win arguments, even though, from my observations, it rarely seemed to work on my mother, who was tone deaf to irony.

She leveled her eyes at her husband. “We can afford it, Derek. What we cannot afford is to lose another child.”

My father seemed stunned. His fingers holding the lamb chop hesitated in their downward arc to his plate, his mouth frozen in the act of chewing. It was as if she had just committed some grievous foul in a game whose rules adhered strictly to common civility. I was surprised, too, by her unexpected reminder of my brother's death. She had broken a silence that she herself had imposed two years ago when she could not seem to contain her grief and depression over Calvin. "If you don't want to see me in the crazyhouse," she'd said back then, "please don't even mention his name in my presence. I can't bear the pain of him right now. If you care at all for my feelings...." She had even removed his pictures from the walls and shelves in the living room and front hallway, where all the family shared space, and she had packed them away in a steamer trunk stored in the attic. My father, I knew, kept Cal's picture in his wallet, the one of him in his Navy uniform, looking handsomely stern and no-nonsense, when he graduated from Underwater Demolition Team training as a Navy frogman. But I was the only one in the family who, contrary to my mother's moratorium on graven images of her lost son, retained any physical reminder of him where everyone could see it. I wore a ring Calvin had given me when he'd graduated from UDT school: a sterling silver ring embossed with the official seal of the U.S. Navy on either side of a crowning dark blue stone. It was too big for my finger, but Cal had shown me how to wrap adhesive tape around the bottom of the band, decreasing its circumference until it snugged onto my middle finger. He gave it to me the last time I was ever to see him, before he left for Korea in 1951. I wore the ring as faithfully as our father wore his wedding band. I had it on even at that moment when my mother surprised us, and I touched it with my thumb, rotating it around my finger while my father waited, his curved lamb chop bone in hand, to see what she would say next.

But as soon as she'd made reference to the death, she moved right past it, addressing me.

“I'm afraid this is one pill you are going to have to swallow, darling. I am adamant about this. But mark my words, this will be one of the most remarkable summers you've ever had.”

And she remained adamant. Cheerful, even, as the time of my departure drew nearer. She sang to herself while she ironed and tagged my clothes to pack in a black steamer trunk with nickel-plated hinges and latch, and she went about even her regular household chores with a manic energy that seemed at times calculated to irritate me. Even when, in just a few short months from that day in November, the miraculous vaccine promised for so long was finally distributed to doctors and clinics all over the country and my mother made sure I was among the first to be inoculated by our family doctor with the Salk miracle drug—“in the nick of time,” my father would say, referring to both me and his wife—it was too late to save me from Camp Hemlock. I continued on into my last few weeks of school, telling my friends that it was not my fault I was being forced to go to a candy-assed summer camp by my crazy mother. I asked them not to forget about me while I was gone, I'd write to them from that stupid place.

About meeting new kids at camp, my mother was right. Everyone there would be new, and I would come to know a few boys at Hemlock who would leave their impression on me. The events of that single summer wrote themselves indelibly on my memory, and when I think back on the time before I arrived in the green and ancient mountains of New Hampshire, it was as if I had known nothing of life outside my home. It could be that my resistance to going away was not, as I thought, my fear that my Wellesley friends would be changed when I returned, but, as my mother predicted, they would be the same as always, that it would be I who no longer recognized them

Boys In Exile

across the fissure that would cut itself between us by our differing experiences that summer.

At least, that's the way it turned out.

3.

You Don't Have To Go

Jimmy Reed

Camp Hemlock's registration form had advised "Check-in from 8:00 a.m. 'til 3:00 p.m. at the Canteen." My mother believed in punctuality. We left Wellesley at 5:30 in the morning, my father at the wheel of his Pontiac Chieftain station wagon—his business car for carrying the big black sample cases of hats to clothing stores (carrying now only my shiny black trunk and the three of us). By 7:35 we were driving through the main street of Worcester Mills, New Hampshire on State Highway 11. Six winding miles farther on, with nothing but dense woods on both sides of the Worcester Mills road, we turned at a sign with a green Christmas tree emblem and the words "Camp Hemlock," then onto a dirt country road through pine woods another half mile to the camp's graveled parking lot. My father pulled into a space between two other cars adjacent a creosoted log building with a green roof. Carved into a weathered wood plank above the door was the legend "Canteen." My mother referred briefly to a mimeographed page of instructions in a folder she had received. "This is right," she said. It was 7:55 a.m.

The Canteen was a small one-room store that held two Coca Cola bottle-vending chests and two long display cases whose glass shelves were heaped with merchandise. In the middle of the room was a plank picnic table at which sat the camp's owners, the Petrys, Agnes and Robert, a couple as weathered-looking as the sign above the door. Mrs. Petry, it turned out, was the woman my mother had spoken with on the phone some months before.

“This is Elliott,” my mother announced as if she were delivering on a promise. She seemed so visibly relieved, her hands trembled as she handed over my inoculation papers she had brought with us.

The Petrys were thin, white-haired people. They both wore identical khaki shorts and camp T-shirt with the same green Christmas tree print as on the sign out on the highway. Under the tree, in rocking-horse-curve lettering, were the words Camp Hemlock. Their elbows and knees were knobby as walnuts. It was hard for me to tell how old they were—sixties, seventies, perhaps older—because they both had that leathered, outdoorsy skin and rigid posture of the fit and hearty elderly. Mr. Petry's temples and forearms were tiddly-winked with liver spots, and white hairs bristled like alfalfa sprouts from his ears.

“And you're twelve this year?” Mrs. Petry asked me.

“Almost thirteen,” I said. Two more months and I would reach that threshold age of my teen years. I could hardly wait.

“Well, we've assigned you to Timber Wolf cabin. That's for boys eleven and twelve. Mr. Barrett is your counselor and Peter Stang, who has been with us—oh my,” she raised her eyes to calculate, “this is his fifth summer now. Peter is cabin proctor this year. When you leave here, bring your things to your cabin and he will be there to greet you.”

While my mother chatted with the Petrys and filled out more forms exonerating the camp of liability in the event of my death, dismemberment, or dissatisfaction, I drifted away and joined my father who was studying all the stuff in the cases and on the shelves. There were confections in one case: Hershey bars, Good and Plenty, Necco wafers, Walnetto and Three Musketeers bars, all day suckers, Charleston Chews, strings of rock candy in a jar, Black Jack, Juicy Fruit and Wrigley gum. In another case were ebony-handled Kamp King jackknives, canteens, compasses, flashlights, silver whistles,

pencils and stationery with the camp logo, toothbrushes, Colgate toothpaste and Squibb in its brown and cream tube (the brand we used at home!), Ivory soap bars, soap dishes and washcloths, Eagle fish hooks, fishing lures and line, and Zebco reels. On shelves above the cases were stacks of camp T-shirts and tan shorts, Levi's dungarees, Keds and Red Ball Jets sneakers. Even Fruit of the Loom underwear and white socks.

"A general store for kids," my father said. "They probably do enough business on this stuff alone to make their profits for the year."

All I said to my father was, "Well, they won't make anything off of me. I don't have a red cent to buy stuff with anyway." I felt sorry for myself over this added deprivation. None of my mother's sheets of instructions had said anything about bringing extra money for a candy bar or a silver whistle, and no one had offered me "mad money" to buy even a Coke or grape Nehi if I wanted one.

"They've made more than their fair share off of us as it is," my father said, referring, I supposed, to what it had cost him to send me to camp. "This little side business, if you ask me, is a souvenir trap, pure and simple." My father equated souvenirs with worthlessness, in spite of the fact that when he returned from every long trip he brought back trinkets for my mother and picture postcards of where he'd been for me.

"Well, they won't make anything from me," I said again, doing my best imitation of outrage at the swindle the Petrys were perpetrating on us. To reinforce my indignation I added, "We ought to just turn around and go home."

"Too late for that, old pal. Your mother's signed the check already."

Something in his tone implied we were all victims here—perhaps even the Petrys—of Emily Streett's iron will.

Her business accomplished with the Petrys, my mother was given a mimeographed map of the camp and shown the way to get to Timber Wolf cabin. My father unloaded my trunk from the car and hoisted it to his shoulder.

According to Mrs. Petry's map, the sleeping cabins were at the end of a path west of the Canteen parking lot, through a short grove of woods and then along the edge of some open area labeled the "Commons."

The path let out at one end of a wide and long expanse of grass. There was a semi-circular area at this end delineated by a curve of stone wall, and in its crescent was a flagpole with the American flag flying. Alongside it was a stubby cannon barrel on a wooden gun mount, like ones on the old sailing ships in the Horatio Hornblower movies. I later learned this was the "Reveille" and "Taps" flagpole and the cannon, its barrel plugged tight, was from the Civil War. Every morning from this place Mr. Petry would blow Reveille on a battered brass bugle, and every evening he would signal the end of our day by blowing Taps. At the far end of the commons there was a baseball diamond with a chain-link backstop. The grassy field, green now and inviting, would eventually be scarred with bared dirt paths from the shortcuts of campers across its expanse.

Among a stand of pine trees and granite outcroppings the length of the commons were eight log cabins with green-shingled roofs. They presented their backs to the lake below its high bluff. Timber Wolf cabin was the third cabin down the line from the Reveille area. At the head of the short path leading to its front door was a carved totem pole twice as big around as a telephone pole. There was a single figure carved from it: a sitting wolf with its head and throat craned upward, baying at the sky.

Each of the cabins had a totem out front. The cabin next to Timber Wolf, Black Bear, had a standing bear with its jaws open in a

growl, its teeth like white stalactites in a red cave. In front of the cabin on the other side was a pair of bobcats that looked more like overgrown house cats. All the totems had been painted in bright colors and shellacked to a high gloss and looked freshly made, but I felt that Timber Wolf's was much cooler than the others.

"See how real they all look," my mother said. "Someone has certainly spent an awful lot of time carving those."

"They're not that real," I said. I knew the difference back then already between Realism and Impressionism from the visiting art teacher, Mrs. White, who had come to our classroom once a week the past year. She had passed around pictures of famous paintings and buildings. I liked Edward Hopper, who had made the people and the greeny-yellow light inside the café as real as a photograph. But Claude Monet's pictures of lily pads in a pond looked like what Gina Portalis, the girl who sat behind me, said the world was like to her without her glasses. The figures on the totem poles looked more like that. The poles were too narrow around to carve any life-sized representations of anything except the smallest animals—raccoons, chipmunks.

"Look how fine the chisel marks are, almost like fur!" My mother had stopped to reach up and put her hand on a front paw of the wolf in front of my new cabin.

My father, with my steamer trunk still digging into his shoulder, stood behind her on the path.

"See how finely done this is, Derek. Just run your fingers over it."

My father grunted. "Let's get this inside first, can we?" he said. I reached out and touched the wolf's paw. It felt like wood.

Inside, the cabin was one large room with bunk beds along three of the four walls, a wooden trestle table in the center of the floor with long benches on each side and a straight-backed chair at each end. A

fieldstone fireplace possessed the middle of the back wall. The ceiling was open to the rafters, and a log beam spanned the room.

“Oh my,” my mother said in low appreciative tone, “how rustic we are, Elliott. A real log cabin in the wilderness. Like pioneers in their bunk houses.”

My father set the steamer trunk on the table. I counted the number of beds: there were five double bunks and one single cot in all.

Suddenly, through the open door came a lanky, carrot-topped kid with a pale face blotched by freckles. He was dressed in the Hemlock T-shirt and khaki shorts like the Petrys.

“Hello there,” he said. When he smiled his top front teeth stepped out over his bottom lip.

“Hello, young man,” my mother replied.

“I’m Peter Stang. I’m proctor of Timber Wolf cabin,” the boy said.

He was much taller than me, but skinnier, too, which I was pleased to note.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Peter,” Emily said. “This is Elliott Streett. Elliott has been assigned to this cabin, we’ve been told.”

My father gestured toward my steamer trunk on the table. “Where do we put this, Sonny Jim?” he asked.

“His name is Peter Stang, dear,” my mother said.

Peter Stang referred to a clipboard he was holding in one hand. “Well...actually, he can put it anywhere he wants, except not there.” He pointed to the single cot by the door and gave his rabbit-toothed grin. “That’s my bed. But anywhere else. No one has arrived to claim a bunk, yet.”

“So, you’re ranking NCO, then?” my father said.

Peter Stang looked puzzled for an instant. Then the curtain went up on his gleaming teeth again when he realized my father's military humor. "Oh, yes, sort of."

My father often made military references when he spoke, even though he had never served in the Army. The only one in my family to have served was my older brother Calvin. But the fathers of a number of my classmates had been in the Army or Navy and they all used military slang a lot, and so I had come to accept it as something most men of my father's generation did.

"So you're in charge of everyone, then?" my father tried again.

"Not exactly. I'm the cabin proctor this summer," Peter replied.

"And what is that, exactly?"

"I help out our counselor, Hank Barrett. All the counselors sleep in Panther two cabins down, and the proctors look after things in the cabins and make sure they stay tidy and help the new campers find their way around."

"Oh, how nice," my mother said. "It's like a reward, then. And I imagine you get some extra privileges or an allowance for being a proctor?"

"Proctors go to the head of the line at mess hall, and they meet in camp council every week with Mr. Petry and the adult counselors."

"Such a deal," my father said.

"And what does your father do for a living?" my mother asked.

Peter hesitated, as if considering the question for the first time. I could see him almost weigh his decision to answer.

"Have you heard of Stang Electric?"

"Stang Electric," my father replied, mulling it over a moment. "Manufactures electrical wire and switches and things?"

"Electrical components for radios and television and radar. They make transistors, capacitors, resistors and micro switches, mostly for

the military,” Peter said, and his whole posture seemed to draw more erect.

I had never heard those words before—transistors, capacitors, micro switches—didn't have the vaguest notion what Peter Stang was talking about. But my father whistled low.

“Government contracts, huh? For computer mainframes?”

“For any kind of board circuitry. Mainframes, walkie-talkies, radar, lots of things,” Peter said.

“Very nice. Nice indeed. Lots of money in that. They say that's the future of this country, computers.” I'd not heard my father voice any knowledge of computers, but his tone had changed to respect and I looked at Peter Stang now with interest. My father liked people who were smart, and he warmed to intelligence wherever he found it, in adults or children. He turned to me. “Well? What'll it be? A top or a bottom berth?”

I had never slept in bunk beds before. I didn't know what I wanted. All of the five double bunks that lined the walls looked alike. “Which is better?” I asked.

“Depends,” my father said. “On a top bunk, you're out of the way, but you're closer to the ceiling and the heat on hot nights. And, if the guy below you is a wiseacre, then he's probably going to be poking at your mattress when you're trying to sleep, or kicking his feet up and trying to knock you out of bed. You've got farther to fall if you roll out of bed in your sleep.”

“Then I want a lower bunk, I guess.”

“If you take a lower,” my father replied, “then you have the guy above you creaking the springs over your head all night. Plus he's going to be climbing down and stepping on your bed when he gets up at night to go to the bathroom.”

I was never good at deciding when the decision to choose one thing excluded another.

My mother said, "I think a nice lower bunk."

"I'd want a bottom bunk," Peter Stang said. "On the bottom it's like being snug and protected in a little fort." He looked at me encouragingly, and something about his solicitous attitude told me he thought I was going to be homesick or afraid or something. I looked around the room again. I felt no affinity yet for the cabin, the beds, Peter Stang or anything else about Camp Hemlock that I'd seen so far.

"That one," I said, settling arbitrarily on an upper bunk near the front door, across from Peter Stang's single cot.

"That one's good, too," Peter said and picked up his clipboard and made a notation. "Usually the breezes at night come from this side of the cabin."

There was something fernlike about Peter, a wispy gracefulness that made me worry for a moment. My own envy of boys with higher intelligence generally left me leery of befriending them. With his flaming red hair, buckteeth and adult manner of speaking, Peter Stang would not survive in my school, I was pretty sure, without some seriously compensating masculine characteristics—or the ability to run fast. And we weren't as hard on kids who were "squares" as some other places with tougher kids like Natick or Newton. I would have bet anything Peter Stang was a private school pansy from a rich family.

My father slid my trunk from the table and set it on the floor at the foot of my bunk.

Just then the screen door opened and through it came another boy carrying a trunk like mine on shoulders as broad as an ox yoke. This boy wore a pale blue Oxford shirt and cream-colored trousers with a knife-edged crease. Around his neck was a necktie with a brightly painted scene of polo players atop brown and black horses in full stride. He stepped inside and heaved the trunk on top of my trunk at

the foot of the bed and then moved aside to admit a woman with a yellow bouffant hairdo and wearing a pink- and yellow-flowered dress.

“Hello, everyone, here we are,” she said, smiling at our little knot of people and scanning the room for others. “Another grand first day at Camp Hemlock. Hello, Peter, how are you. Did you have a good year?”

“Hello, Mrs. Waite. I had a great year, thank you,” Peter Stang said. “Hey, Billy.”

The kid said nothing. His face was sullen, and he glowered at Peter, then at me. I stepped back, giving him a wide berth to get around me.

“Who's up there?” he asked, indicating the bunk I'd chosen.

“He is,” Peter said, nodding at me.

“I get the top bunk by the door.”

“Well, I'm afraid he arrived first,” Peter said.

“Come then, William, choose another,” the woman said.

“I don't want another. The upper by the door is always mine,” the kid said, quietly but quite distinctly. He swung his head and shoulders in a scan of the room. He looked so perturbed that I was about to say it was all right by me if he took the upper bunk. But my mother spoke up before I had the chance.

“First come, first served,” she said with false cheeriness. “And Elliott was the early bird, it seems.” She smiled at the boy's mother. “I'm Emily Streett,” she said, extending her hand. “From Wellesley.”

The woman's face lit up with surprise. “Really! How wonderful! Wellesley's my alma mater. Class of '39.” She reached out and touched my mother's hand in return.

“You graduated from Wellesley High School?” my mother asked.

“Oh no, dear, Wellesley College,” the woman said. “Margaret Waite. With an 'e' on the end of the ‘wait.’ My friends all poke fun,

of course, and say 'Margaret, wait!' like they wish me to stop, or something. But it does have the 'e' on the end. And this is my son William.”

“Billy.” The kid glowered.

“William Waite,” my mother replied with a hint of amusement in her voice. She turned to me and, in a voice that seemed as if she were announcing an honored guest whom everyone had been expecting, said, “And this is Elliott. It's his first camping experience.”

“Well, how wonderful. He'll love it. William has been coming for three years now. This will be his fourth. He's become an old camp veteran, haven't you, Willy-Billy?”

The boy blew an impatient breath of air through his nose.

While he was not much taller than I, he was considerably bigger—barrel-chested and muscular, not at all soft anywhere I could see. His appearance was so opposite Peter Stang's, I took heart that maybe not everyone in this dumb place was going to turn out to be a goofy-looking goody-goody after all.

I'd never seen a tie so loud on a kid my age, but I was already deciding its gaudiness was sort of cool. It took some guts to wear something like that, and he looked like he was pretty gutsy. At the same time, I was nervously alert. Bigger kids always spiked my anxiety at first, until I could figure them out enough to know where their good side lay and how I would get on it.

My mother said, “Well, I'm just so happy to be able to get Elliott out of town and away from the dreadful summer heat and illnesses. It's a blessing there's a place for boys to come where the air is clean and there are plenty of healthy activities.”

“Oh, it'll be a blessing for you, too,” Mrs. Waite said, touching my mother's arm confidentially. “My husband and I look forward to the eight weeks of peace and quiet, although I think it's more for my

sanity than his. He's out of the house so much, spending time at his office and in the hospital, we hardly see him anyway.”

“In the hospital? Is he ill?” my mother asked.

“Oh no. Healthy as a horse. He's a physician. A neurosurgeon, actually.”

“A surgeon,” my mother said.

My father spoke up suddenly. “A neurosurgeon!” And then he did a strange thing: he laughed. It was an event so rare that both my mother and I stared in surprise. “Well, I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy.” The rhyming twists of my father's witty remark were clever, and I sensed the irreverence it implied toward doctors was daring, although I wasn't sure what a “frontal lobotomy” meant, exactly.

Mrs. Waite smiled benignly. “Yes. Yes, I should suppose so.”

“Oh, Derek,” my mother said lightly, but I could tell she was embarrassed. “Elliott, it's time to say our goodbyes,” she said. “Come see us to the car.”

“That's a good idea, William,” Mrs. Waite said. “Why don't you come along, too, say your goodbyes now, and then you can take your time unpacking and settling into your cabin.”

My mother extended her hand to Peter Stang and said, “Thank you so much for assisting us. This will be Elliott's first experience summer camping, and I trust you to help him make it a very pleasant one.”

I cringed.

“Yes, ma'am,” Peter said.

Billy Waite stood in the same place, next to his trunk still on top of mine, with his hands snugged into the pockets of his trousers.

“Peter, you have a good summer. Keep your charges in line, and don't take any guff from this one,” Mrs. Waite said, jerking her head toward Billy.

Peter smiled, eyed Billy quickly, and said, “Thanks, Mrs. Waite. You have a good summer, too.”

“Oh, I intend to. I'm going to drag my husband away from his patients and off to France this year, or die trying.”

Billy no longer looked sullen. He didn't show any emotion I could name. His face was perfectly impassive, not telling anyone anything that was going on inside him. But he did a strange thing: his right hand rose, as if of its own volition, and his fingers and thumb pinched his upper lip into a dimple whose cleft he touched delicately with his index finger. The gesture—so unconscious—made me aware that my own thumb in the same moment was twisting my brother's ring around on my finger, something I did when I was anxious.

Back at our car in the parking lot, my father stepped into the Canteen while my mother hugged me.

“Now don't you worry about anything. You have a good time here and enjoy all your new friends. It'll be over before you know it, and you'll wonder where the time has gone so fast. No time even to feel homesick. When we come back up to get you, you'll be a whole new person, I'll bet.”

“I won't be homesick,” I said. But there was already a pang in my stomach at separating. I had never been anywhere away from home without my parents in my whole life.

Billy Waite was saying goodbye to his mother, as well. But there was none of the physical contact my mother displayed. Mrs. Waite seemed bent on giving Billy some sort of parting advice as she stood before the open driver's door of a big powder blue Cadillac Fleetwood, and he stood before her with his hands in his pockets again, nodding soberly.

My father returned from the Canteen to rescue me before tears gave me away.

“Here, you'll need one of these,” he said. He handed me a Kamp King jackknife. “Every man needs a jackknife. It's got all the gadgets—an awl, a corkscrew, can opener, two blades for whittling and cutting. Keep it in your pocket and keep it sharp, and it won't let you down.”

I held its weight in my hand, mystified and thrilled by the unexpected gift. It was a beautiful thing, fat as a cigar and heavy with the hidden steel of its useful tools.

“Gee,” I said and my spirits immediately lifted. “Geez, thanks, Dad,”

“Derek!” my mother said in alarm. “I'm not sure that's a good idea at all. I don't think they allow boys to carry knives here.”

“I bought it in their own store. It's a Kamp King,” my father said, as if talking to someone slow-witted. “This is a camp, right?”

“I know that, dear, but —”

“And this,” he said to me, handing me a slim paper bag in his other hand. I opened it and peeped in. It was a sheaf of camp stationery and envelopes and a square of 3-cent stamps. “Don't forget to write your mother.” She was at the moment warning me to be very careful with that knife, it wasn't a toy, and I could cut myself or someone else if I didn't handle it with great care.

Before he got back in the car, while my mother was opening the door from the other side, my father turned to me, his back to the driver's door, and held out his hand to shake mine. “You take care,” he said. I took his hand and felt between our palms something other than skin, something a bit slick and crinkly. When he started to take his hand away, he curled my fingers into a fist and turned it palm up. I opened the fist and discovered a twenty-dollar bill folded in half. “For a few extras when you need them,” my father said in a hushed voice. “Don't spend it all at once.”

In my surprise, I was unable to say anything except, "Geez, Dad." He put a finger to his lips and winked.

I stood alongside the station wagon watching him settle into the driver's seat, behind the wheel of his Chieftain. He slipped the Pontiac's Powerglide transmission into reverse and waited with his foot on the brake for his wife to close her door. Billy Waite's mother was leaving as well, getting behind the wheel of her big blue Cadillac. My mother, slamming her own door, said loud enough, I was sure, for Billy's mother to hear, "We should have brought the Packard instead of your wagon, Derek. It gives a much smoother ride."

My father looked at me once again and, with another wink and a smile, he backed out into the parking lot and turned the station wagon's nose up the dirt road. Mrs. Waite's Cadillac glided out of the lot, and it slipped in behind my father's car. Rolling up the wooded drive, the two cars billowed a screen of dust behind that finally obscured them from sight.

Billy ambled toward me, hands still in his pockets.

We didn't say anything to one another, but I could sense Billy was sizing me up, and I certainly was interested in Billy.

To break the ice, I ventured, "If you want the upper bunk, you can have it."

He looked me over, gauging my sincerity perhaps, then replied, "It's okay. Let's see how it goes. I mostly wanted a bed near the door, so I can sneak out easier at night when I want. I'll take the lower for now."

I nodded sagely, not questioning what he meant by sneaking out at night. I was more concerned with what he meant by taking the lower bunk "for now." Did he think he was going to claim my bunk later, if he wanted? Trying to head off possible trouble later, I said,

“The proctor kid just said to take whatever one I wanted. I didn't know someone already had dibs on it.”

“Stang knew. That fairy knows I've been top bunk by the door for three years. He gave it to you on purpose to get my goat.”

“Really? What's the deal?” I didn't tell him I was the one to pick the bed because Stang had first suggested a different one by the fireplace.

“The deal is, he's a needle-dick little pus head who thinks his shit smells like crushed pineapple,” Billy replied.

I laughed impulsively. I'd always been envious of someone who could string together invective in novel ways. I took it as a sign of a quick mind at work. “He has native intelligence,” my mother would say of someone who was smart in an uneducated way, but I didn't think that included this kind of linguistic nimbleness.

“You bring any cigs?” Billy asked. He was smiling now. My laughter seemed to have warmed him.

“Nah. I couldn't sneak any out of the house,” I lied. The truth was, I didn't smoke. Not yet, anyway. Not much. I'd tried a few with my friends who were smoking already, but I couldn't get past the swoony head and bite of the smoke in my bronchial tubes that made me cough. Now, when Billy asked, I wished immediately I had a pack I'd sneaked out from home.

“Wanna get a Coke?” he said.

“Sure,” I replied. I was still awed by the twenty-dollar bill I held in my pocket. The flush of importance it spread through me was new and powerful. “Sure, let's get one.”

“My money's in my trunk still,” Billy said. “Let me bum a Coke off ya.”

“Sure,” I said again. “I've got plenty of dough.”

When Mrs. Petry changed the twenty for me inside the Canteen to have the two dimes to put in the cash slot of the Coke chest for our

sodas, my pants pocket was suddenly thick with bills and change. The coins settled into a comfortable weight with the Kamp King against my thigh.

Billy Waite and I went back outside the Canteen with our drinks. I had a grape Nehi and he had a Coke, and we watched as other kids arrived.

Each time I raised my bottle to my lips, I noticed Billy eying my hand. "What's that?" he said finally.

I followed his eyes. It was my ring he was looking at. I held out my hand so he could read the engraved motto around the deep blue stone. "My brother gave it to me. He was a Navy frogman."

"Let's see." Billy took my hand, bending my fingers and twisting my wrist to get a closer look. "All this says is United States Navy on it."

"It was his Navy ring. He gave it to me when he got out of Underwater Demolitions training, and he got a different ring for that."

"Have him get you one of those rings. They're way cooler. I'd make him get you a UDT ring, if I was you."

I was about to explain why my brother Calvin couldn't get me another ring, when a Ford Fairlane with Massachusetts plates pulled into the parking lot and, even before it had come to a complete stop, a kid jumped out the back door, waving at us.

"Hey, Waiter! How're they hangin'?" he yelled.

"Hey, Fowlballs. You still alive?"

Reflexively, I laughed at the kid's nickname.

He scuffed toward us while his parents opened their doors. "Thought you weren't coming back," he said to Billy.

"Yeh, well.... You bring any weeds?" Billy asked, lowering his voice.

“Just a couple was all I could swipe from my old man,” the boy said. He was thin, with stringy muscles and a black shock of slicked-back hair in a ducktail. He looked me over. “Who's this?”

“New kid. He ain't got any. So, come on, let's get your stuff up to the cabin and send your folks home and we'll go down back of the boathouse and have a last weed.”

“Didn't you bring none?” the kid asked.

“I had them. Two packs of Luckies. But my old lady found them before I could put them in my trunk.”

“Aw, no shit? Two packs? What a raw deal.”

“Sure is, but...well, we'll sneak into town one of these days and swipe some from the grocery store,” Billy Waite said.

“Gotta do it,” the kid agreed. Then he looked at me again. I could feel he was sizing me up, wanting to know what the score was with me—was I cool or just a hanger-on? “Anyways, who we got for counselor this year?”

“Barrett. And Jerkoff for proctor,” Billy Waite said.

“Barrett's okay. He's a keen bean,” the kid said. “Which jerkoff is proctor?”

“Who do you think? Peter Eater.”

“Stang? That creep?”

“He's already made my shit list,” Billy said. “He gave away my bunk to this one.” He jerked his head toward me.

I felt the immediate cut: I had just been reduced by Billy Waite to the outsider—This One. I spoke up. “But you can have it back. It doesn't mean diddly-squat to me where I sleep.” I spit in the dirt to show I didn't care.

“Nah, I told you to stay where you are for now,” Billy said. “I'll show Stang who he's screwing with.”

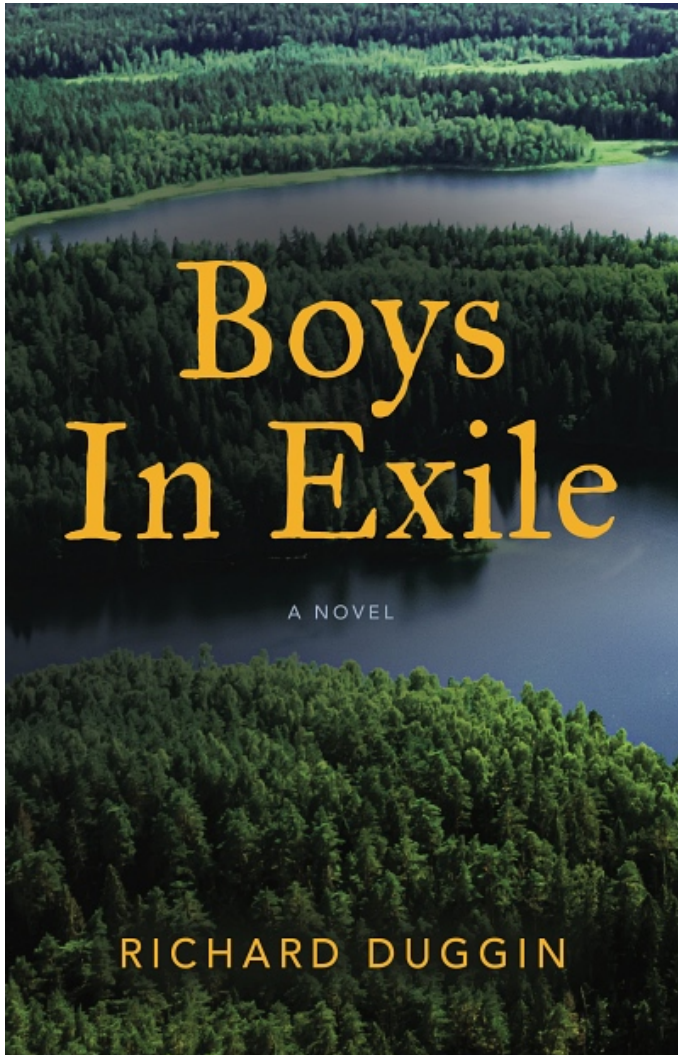
The other boy's parents—his mother in maroon slacks and white blouse, his father in an opened-neck short sleeve shirt and tan

trousers—passed by on their way into the Canteen. “Chris, let's get you checked in,” his father said.

“Okay, Pop.” He jerked his head at Billy. “Come on with me. I gotta show ya something.”

“See ya,” Billy Waite said to me, and he turned and followed this Chris “Fowlballs” kid with the slicked-back black hair.

I was left standing alone for the first time at Hemlock, a Nehi in one hand and the thumb of my other hand stroking the hard silver band of my brother's ring. I watched the rolling clouds of dust from the road as more cars came up the drive. Boys and parents poured out of them like an invading army. I could not imagine making friends here. There were too many, and it seemed they all knew one another already and would not want to know me. Not since kindergarten had I ever had to become acquainted with so many new kids at once. My list of friends at home had grown one or two at a time. The impossibility of learning everyone's name here at Camp Hemlock in just eight weeks convinced me I would always be the new guy. I would never be known the way Billy Waite knew guys. Abandoned there beside the Canteen door, my pockets stuffed with money useless to me without friends, I was sure this was going to be the worst summer of my life.



Boys In Exile is the story of an adolescent boy's coming of age in an era of bullying and exclusion.

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