

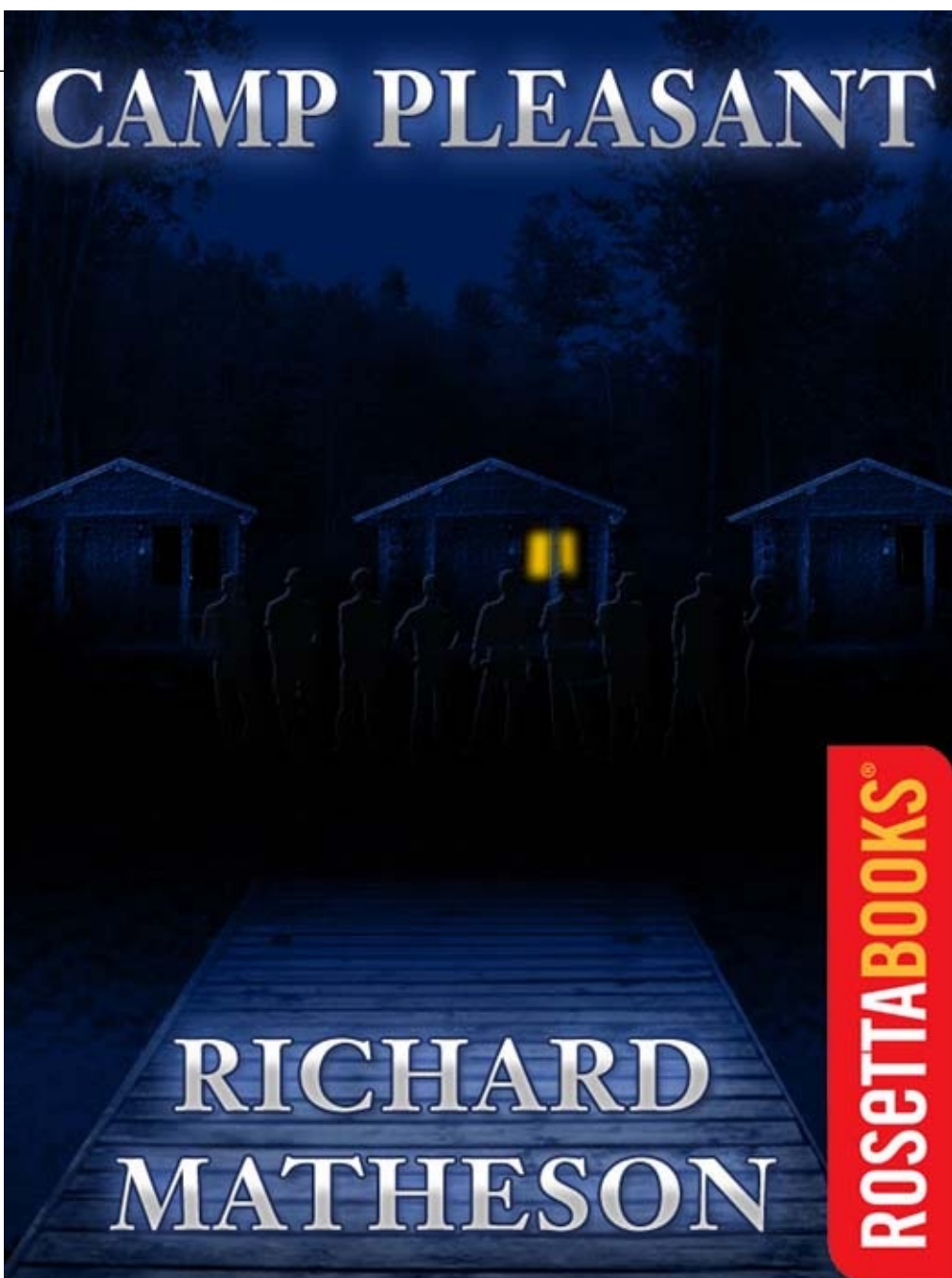
CAMP PLEASANT



RICHARD
MATHESON

ROSETTABOOKS®

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Camp Pleasant

Richard Matheson

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Electronic edition published 2011 by RosettaBooks LLC, New York.

ISBN e-Pub edition: 9780795315763

*To my father,
Scarcely known
but always remembered*

e-Introduction

When I was 17, I worked as a counselor in camp in the Pocono Mountains. I used much of that experience as background for this novel.

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The train wheezed into Emmetsville at nine-sixteen that Saturday night.

“You win.” Bob handed me a dime. “I thought we’d have to get out and push.”

Bob and Mack and I dragged our suitcases off the overhead racks and lugged them down the aisle. “Emmetsville! End of the line!” the conductor’s voice came drifting down from the next car. “You’re telling me,” Bob muttered.

Our shoes crunched across the gravel as we headed for the station waiting room. It was getting chilly out and I could feel the night air through the thinness of my jacket.

“Listen to that engine,” Bob said. “Sounds like an old lady after a hundred yard dash. I’m surprised we ever got here.”

“We’re here, ain’t we?” Mack said.

“Yowza,” Bob said. “Yowza, Mack boy.”

The waiting room was small and smelled of rotting wood and disinfectant. Bob and I put down our luggage and stood waiting while Mack went over to the ticket window and asked the man how we got to Camp Pleasant.

“There’s no bus,” he said when he came back.

“What about taxis?” I asked.

“No taxis either.”

“Fine,” Bob said. “What do we do—walk?”

Mack gave him a withering look. “You can walk if you wanna,” he said, “I’m ridin’.”

“What are you gonna ride, your suitcase?” Bob asked.

“Wait and see, jerk,” Mack answered.

We picked up our luggage and followed him out onto the street. He turned left and started walking along the sidewalk as if he wasn’t carrying two heavy suitcases.

“What’s muscle-head up to now?” Bob wondered.

“Wait and see, jerk,” I imitated Mack’s guttural voice.

Halfway down the block there was a drugstore which Mack went into. We followed him and put down our luggage again. Mack was thumbing slowly through the telephone book and we walked over to him.

“Who you gonna call, the Red Cross?” Bob asked.

“Stop shootin’ off your mouth and you’ll see,” Mack said.

He didn’t find what he was looking for though and a confused look crossed his face.

“Are you trying to find the camp’s number?” I asked him.

“Yeah, but it’s not here.”

“The camp’s probably in another county,” I said. “Why don’t you call information?”

“That’s right,” Mack said, nodding. He glanced at Bob. “Why don’t you use your brain like Matt?”

“I jyst come over on the ferryboat,” Bob told him.

“The *fairyboat*,” Mack said, reaching into his pocket for change.

Bob and I went over to the fountain for coffee while we waited.

“That guy kills me,” Bob said. “If you go in for anything besides sports and screwing Mack thinks you’re queer.”

I shrugged. “Don’t let it bother you,” I said.

“Yowza,” Bob said and the girl brought us our coffee.

2.

The truck groaned to a halt in front of the drugstore and a short, well- built man, about thirty, got out of the cab. He was wearing blue denims and had a tan corduroy jacket over his sweat shirt. There were sneakers on his feet, a dark baseball cap on his head.

“Hi, fellas,” he said, sticking out his hand. “I’m Sid Goldberg, head of the Senior Division.” We shook hands.

“You’re in my division, Harper,” he told me. “Cabin thirteen.”

I nodded and smiled. “Swell.”

We put our luggage on the back of the truck and Mack got into the cab.

“Good old Mack,” Bob said as we climbed up on the truck. “Always in there.”

“We’d better sit behind the cab,” I said. “It’s liable to be a little windy.” We sat down on our upright suitcases.

“All set?” Sid Goldberg called and we called back that we were.

The motor coughed into life and we felt that truck jolt under us as it picked up speed. Immediately, a cold wind rushed down over us, ruffling our hair, penetrating our jackets.

“What makes you think it’s going to be windy?” Bob asked, his face lost behind wind flying hair.

“Just a suspicion,” I answered.

We had to bend over at the waist to keep the direct blast off our heads. We crossed our arms and tried to keep warm, at the same time trying to keep the suitcases steady.

“This is the life!” Bob said. “A leisurely summer in the country!”

Sid Goldberg kept driving faster and faster. By the time we were out of town, the truck was doing seventy, roaring and rocking along the dark country road. Bob and I kept losing balance and falling against each other.

“*Jesus!*” Bob shouted. “This guy must have learned to drive on the Indianapolis Speedway!”

His suitcase fell over suddenly and he went flopping on the floor of the truck. Over the whistling rush of wind I heard his cursing and watched him lunge at his suitcase which was

sliding away from him.

“What a way to start the summer!” he shouted when he was back beside me but I couldn't answer because I was laughing too hard.

“That's right, laugh, you bastard!” he screamed. “I could've broken my neck!”

In a minute, freezing, rocking, blinded by blowing hair, he was laughing as hard as I was.

3.

The truck rolled down the pebble-strewn path into Camp Pleasant, low-hanging branches brushing and scraping across the cab roof and swishing over our heads.

“There,” I said, “that wasn't so bad, was it?”

“I hope the dispensary's open,” Bob answered. “My can is fractured.”

Sid Goldberg braked the truck in front of a large, dark building.

“The dining hall,” Bob muttered as we both stood. We handed the luggage to Sid Goldberg and Mack, then jumped down onto the ground.

“Ooh, my legs,” Bob said.

“S'matter, boys, have a rough ride?” Mack asked blandly.

“You bastard,” Bob muttered.

“All right, fellas,” Sid told us. “You wanna follow me? I'll show you where to bunk down tonight.”

We trudged behind him under the high darkness toward a dark building on the shore of the lake.

“This is where we put on most of our shows,” Bob told me as we scuffed down the path. “They show movies here on Wednesday nights and have song fests.”

I grunted acknowledgment. The song fests would be my job. I was to be the music director; the first the camp had ever had.

We reached the lodge and Sid pushed open the door. It was pitch black inside, smelling of damp wood and molding mattresses. Our footsteps echoed off the high ceiling as we walked across the floor.

“Take your choice,” Sid said, his voice sounding hollow. “One's about as good as another.”

Back in the cabin, Sid waited until Mack got the battery lamp from his suitcase and set it on one of the upper bunks. Then he said, “I think you're all squared away now. You can let down the window shutters if you want more air. And you know where Paradise is.”

“Yeah,” Mack said. This was his third year at Camp Pleasant. He worked on the waterfront.

“Glad to have met you fellas,” Sid said. “I'll see you in the morning.”

He left us and became a thin beam of light dwindling off into the darkness. Bob and I got pajamas from our suitcases while Mack stripped off his clothes and put a striped bathrobe over his thickly muscled body.

“What’s Paradise?” I asked.

“The head,” Mack said. “Where I’m going now to drop one.”

“How delicate,” Bob said.

Mack snorted. “Oh, *ex-cuse me!* I mean—I am going to have a *bowel* movement.”

When Mack was gone, I propped my flashlight on the bunk I’d picked.

“Doesn’t he like you?” I asked.

“Oh, muscle-head’s all right,” Bob said. “He’s an oaf, that’s all.” He slipped on his terrycloth bathrobe. “When he gets to know you better, he’ll start on you too.”

The walk to Paradise was a long one over rough ground, under the rustle of four-story pine trees, between rows of dark cabins, set to the music of crickets and the occasional, far-off belch of a frog.

“The Senior Division is the farthest one from Paradise,” Bob told me as we walked. “Then the Intermediate, then the Junior. I guess they figure the younger they are, the harder it is for them to hold it.”

“You have a Junior cabin, don’t you?”

“Good God, no, Intermediate. I wouldn’t take a Junior cabin on a bet. You always get stuck with a couple of sailors.”

“What’s that?”

“Kid who wets his bed at night. Boy, can they stink up a cabin.”

Paradise was a tall building on the edge of the woods, built like the others, with logs and rough planking. We went up the long flight of steps and through the front doorway. As we entered, Mack was standing on one side of the long double row of sinks that ended in a small shower room. As he brushed his teeth, the buttery glow of his lamp lit his broad hair-swirled chest. I joined him at the sinks while Bob went into the other section where the toilets were.

I washed my hands and face, then took the toothbrush from my toilet case and pressed a half inch of paste onto the bristles. In the other room, Bob was singing soulfully — “*I’m a little teapot short and stout. Here is my handle, here is my spout.*”

“What do ya think of this guy, Goldberg?” Mack asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Was he here last year?”

“No. We had Johnny Wilson but he’s in the Marines now. He was a good joe.”

I nodded. “Goldberg’s probably all right too.”

“We’ll wait and see,” Mack said. “You can’t ever tell about these kikes.”

Later, while we were making our beds, I asked Bob why we were in camp three days before the kids arrived.

“Man, you have to *earn* your hundred and fifty when you work for Big Ed,” Bob told me. “We’ll be cutting grass and sweeping floors and lugging mattresses and trunks and every damn thing the next three days.”

“Well, isn’t that *too* bad,” Mack said, zipping his nude body up in his sleeping bag. “You get those lily-white hands all dirty.”

“Screw you,” Bob said.

“You’d like to,” Mack answered.

“No,” said Bob. “As a matter of fact, dear boy, the very concept repels me.”

“Well, *good night*, dear boy!” Mack threw back in a labored falsetto and turned on his bulky side, muttering to himself, “Another goddam Merv.”

“Yowza,” Bob said tiredly. I wondered who Merv was.

We got into our bunks and Bob lit a cigarette before going to sleep.

“Yeah,” he said to me, “You’ve got quite an experience ahead of you meeting Big E. Nolan.”

“Yeah, he don’t like you either,” contributed Mack.

“His scorn is my badge of honor,” Bob answered.

“Aah, shut up,” Mack growled. “Someone wants to sleep.”

“Someone?” Bob said, his voice suddenly dramatic. “Who can this someone be? Laocoon? King Henry the Fifth? Saint Augustine? Little Nemo?”

“Shit,” Mack said.

“Ah,” Bob said, “it is he, Mack Muscle-Head.”

“You want *your* head handed to ya?” Mack asked.

“No,” Bob sotto voced, “I need it. I own a hat. Good night, all.”

4.

The bugle blew me out of Julia’s arms and, for one hideous moment, I thought I was back at that country hospital again, screaming as the doctors, telling them she wasn’t dead and I’d kill them if they touched her.

Then I looked out the screen door and saw the mist-covered lake and heard the bright singing of birds. There was a thumping sound and, looking toward the bunks on the opposite wall, I saw Mack reaching for his underwear. I got up and pulled off the top of my pajamas.

“Up,” I said to Bob, “and at them.”

“Forward my remains to mother,” his muffled voice came filtering through the blankets.

“How soon is breakfast?” I asked Mack.

“Half hour after reveille,” he said. I nodded, then looked over again at the comatose mound that was Bob Dalrymple.

“Come on,” I told him.

Bob drew back the covers from his sleep-numbed features. “Behold,” he said, “the face of death.”

“Okay, jerk!” Mack said loudly, “hit the deck!” He grabbed the bedclothes and dragged Bob off the edge of the bunk. Bob hit the deck on three points, his outraged curse bounding off the cabin walls. Mack grabbed his toilet kit and left while Bob half-sat, half-lay on the floor, looking dizzy.

“Ain’t he sweet?” he said.

“Get dressed,” I told him.

Twenty minutes later, we were approaching the front of the dining hall where a cluster of men stood, two of them middle-aged, the rest in their early twenties. I recognized “Doc” Rainey, the assistant camp director who had hired me in the city; but the rest of the group, except for Mack and Sid Goldberg, were strangers.

“Nolan here?” I asked Bob as we crossed the log bridge.

“Uh-uh. He’s probably in the kitchen stuffing his gut with bacon.”

“You really go for him, don’t you?” I said.

“Wait,” was all he answered.

We reached the group and Doc shook my hand, then introduced me to the others. There was Jack Stauffer, the bulky water-front director, old Barney Wright who headed field athletics, Mick Curleman who ran the craft shop; plus an assortment of cabin counselors, each of whom worked on the waterfront, the athletic fields or the craft shop.

While we were standing there, a tall bony man in his early thirties came walking around the edge of the dining hall and joined us. He was wearing a tee-shirt and very abbreviated shorts which revealed two long, skinny legs ending in tennis shoes.

“Matt, this is Merv Loomis,” Bob introduced him. “He’s in charge of hikes.”

“I’m delighted,” he said when Bob told him I was going to be the music director. “Culture in this camp, with all due respect to the efforts of our esteemed dramatics director—” he bowed to Bob—“has, in the past, been largely confined to horseshoes and butterfly mounting.”

It was easy to see why Mack thought what he did about Merv—Merv with his gaunt, patrician face, his close brush cut, his immaculate use of words. I liked him though.

“I’m afraid you’ll find your job fast assuming the proportions of an epic venture,” Merv said when I told him of my hopes of forming the glee club among the boys. “The little reptiles would sooner cut their throats than sing a song.”

The door was opened then by one of the kitchen help and we filed into the dim coolness of the dining hall.

There was a young woman sitting at the large table. She smiled at all of us as we approached, our footsteps echoing in the great room. I heard some of the counselors call her Ellen and Doc Rainey said, “Good morning, my dear,” to her.

“Who’s she?” I whispered to Merv as he sat down between Bob and myself.

“Ellen Nolan,” he said.

“His daughter?”

“No, dear boy,” Merv said, amusedly, “his wife.”

I confess to a frank staring at her. Since I’d first heard of Ed Nolan, I’d thought of him as a middle-aged man. Certainly, Bob’s descriptions of him had done nothing to alter that idea.

Ellen Nolan couldn’t have been a day over twenty-one, I thought. She was a frail-looking

woman, a little pale, her eyes brown and very large. Thick, auburn hair fell to her shoulder drawn and ribboned behind her small ears. Her lips, as she smiled, were thin and had no lipstick. She was wearing a cotton dress, white with green squares on it and, from what I could see of her figure, it was as slight and fragile as her face. She was almost an opposite to Julia, the thought occurred painfully. Julia, tall, blonde, Amazonian.

I tried not to think about her but I couldn't help it.

We were breaking open our cereal boxes when Bob said, "Here comes Big Ed."

I looked up, curious, to see that my original conception of Ed Nolan was quite accurate. He was middle-aged, semi-bald, a great hulk of a man squeaking over the floorboards like an ape in sneakers, his face broad and red-flushed behind rimless glasses, the contour of his thick-lipped mouth broken by the dark jutting of an unlit, half-smoked cigar.

A general murmur of "Hi ya, Ed," went up from the counselors and he raised one paw of his hand in greeting, not the remotest flicker of change on his face. He sank down heavily in the chair beside his wife's and I saw her wince as he, quite obviously, pinched her under the table. He plucked the cigar from his mouth, laid it beside his plate, quaffed down orange juice in a swallow and refilled his glass to the brim.

"Ed is hungry," Bob murmured beneath the general chatter of conversation at the table. "He's probably had ten or eleven rashers of bacon and a few dozen eggs."

While we ate I looked over at Nolan. He was wolfing down cereal, his cheeks bulging with spoonfuls of it, heavily sugared. I noticed the small hole in his tee-shirt through which protruded tufts of black hair. Directly under his large pectorals began the downward bulge of his belly. I glanced at his wife. She seemed so out of place next to Nolan; like a fawn coupled to a grizzly bear. Once, she looked up before I could glance away and, for an instant, I unable to take my eyes from hers. She smiled a little at me and I felt a shudder run down my back. I reached for the newly brought plate of scrambled eggs.

In the middle of eggs and toast Nolan rose and stood silently until the noise had abated and the eating ceased. Then he picked the cigar from his mouth and spoke.

"Some of you have been with me before," he said. "Some of you are here for the first time. But remember this—all of you. No matter if you're new here or you know the ropes—expect good work from you. You're being paid for it and that's the way I want my camp run."

While Ed Nolan talked, I looked at his wife. She was staring at the table and there was a look of strange, bleak emptiness in her eyes.

5.

Directly after breakfast, Bob and I retired to the fields to scythe until the ground was thick with mown grass, the air heavy with the hot smell of sap and pollen dust. We worked under an over blast of sunlight, the salty taste of sweat in our mouths. I hadn't done manual labor since the army and that morning did me in. By ten I had to handkerchief my right hand to protect the blisters. By eleven I was starting to burn and had to put my tee-shirt back on; by twelve the burning ache had penetrated to my muscles. I sat stiff and miserable at lunch, downing nevertheless, a gigantic meal.

Happily, lunch was followed by an hour's rest period, a regular feature of Camp Pleasant's schedule. I slept heavily and motionlessly on the cabin bunk until Bob shook me back to consciousness. Groggy with sleep, I trudged back to the fields again for an afternoon of gathering up the cut grass and stuffing it into sacks which we tossed on the truck so Sam Goldberg could drive them to the giant incinerator.

At four-thirty, Big Ed pronounced the lake open. I wanted to head for my bunk and sleep again but Bob managed to talk me out of it. I was glad he did. The lake was barely cool and soothed my muscles to feel the water stroking them.

Supper was at five-thirty. Ellen Nolan wasn't there. When I asked Bob about it he said there was a kitchen in the Nolan's cabin and, sometimes, Ellen Nolan ate there instead of going to the dining hall.

The meal was interrupted at mid-point by another Nolan speech. He told us that we had only three days to get the camp into "topnotch" shape and if we didn't "get into high gear" he'd have to take away our swimming time and cut the rest period in half. The camp, he said, had always been in "topnotch" shape on opening day and, by God, he was going to see to it that it was this year too.

When Big Ed had finished, we returned to our cold supper and finished it. Afterward, Bob, Merv and I took the half-mile walk up the road to the small grocery store. There, we sat on the porch, sipping Cokes, Merv smoking his slender pipe, Bob a cigarette.

"Does he always give speeches?" I asked.

"Incessantly," Bob said.

"How bad is he really?" I asked.

"He represents," Merv said, "all that is dismaying in the world. His insensibility to the feeling of others is shocking. His crushing approach to human relations is hideous."

"You make him sound like Hitler," I said.

"In his own oafish way," Merv said, "Ed Nolan has reduced Camp Pleasant to a microcosm of the Third Reich."

"Why do you stand for it?" I asked. "Why do the kids' parents stand for it?"

"To answer the first question," Merv answered, "Bob and I come here because we like the camp and the country. I worked in this camp years before Nolan came and I'm certainly not going to let him keep me from my summer here which I enjoy. As to opposing him, however, this is tantamount to an attempt to bash in the side of a tank with a daisy. Nolan has the support of the parents for the simple reason that they don't know about him. Kids don't talk about discipline unless it's fresh in their minds or done to crushing excess. Ed knows the limits. He always slacks off around visiting day and toward the end of each camping period."

"Then he's not dumb," I said.

"Oh no, he has great animal cunning," Merv conceded, "which is, precisely, what makes him so dangerous."

I put down my empty Coke bottle.

"Looks like I'm in for a grand summer," I said.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Bob said. “Just stay out of his way and he won’t even notice you.”

I tried to console myself with that.

6.

In the evenings, the Nolan’s cabin was open house to Camp Pleasant personnel. There was a record player, current magazines, checker, chess and card games and a screened-in porch with wicker chairs where one could sit and gaze at the night-shrouded lake.

I wanted to go to bed but Bob talked me into a game of chess before sacking out. So, after returning from the grocery store, we started for the Nolan cabin, Merv leaving us with the statement that he had some reading to do.

“He doesn’t ever go to Ed’s cabin,” Bob said. “There’s a lot of tension between them. Ed hates him, I think. He’s been trying to oust Merv for years but Merv is almost an institution in the camp and the only one who knows the surrounding country well enough to organize hikes.” Bob shook his head. “Ed keeps looking for some excuse to get rid of Merv. Maybe some day he’ll find one.”

We walked along the trail past the wooden-floored tent where Sid Goldberg, Barney Wright and the heads of the Junior and Intermediate sections lived. Sid was sitting on the small porch, his legs propped up on the railing. He greeted us and we said hello as we passed.

“He seems like a nice fella,” Bob said, “even if he is a dirty kike.”

“Mack been at you too?” I asked.

“Yowza.” Bob pointed to a little cabin in a patch of trees. “That’s where Jack Stauffer and his wife live,” he said. “Doc Rainey used to live there but he let Jack have it last year after Jack got married. Doc lives in a little tent by the water. He’s a good guy, Doc. He should be head of the camp.”

The trail turned left now and I saw, at its foot, a moderately sized log cabin with yellow curtains in the windows.

“There’s Ellen Nolan in the kitchen,” Bob said and I saw her pass before the window.

“She’s a pretty girl,” I said.

“You think so?” Bob asked, sounding surprised. “I never thought of her that way. She always seemed like, oh, I don’t know. Just Big Ed’s wife, I guess.”

We reached the house and Bob pulled open a groaning screen door. Ellen Nolan, standing at the sink, looked around.

“Hi, Ellen,” Bob said and she smiled. “You haven’t met Matt Harper, have you?”

“No, I haven’t, Bob,” Ellen said.

We smiled at each other.

“Ed tells me you’re going to be our music director,” she said.

“Yes.” I nodded, thinking again how incredible it seemed that she was Ed Nolan’s wife.

“That’s wonderful,” she said. Her brown eyes met mine as I heard Bob saying that we

come down for a game of chess.

Ed Nolan was in the living room, talking sports with two of the athletic counselors.

“—play *hard* ball, *fast* ball.” We got in on the tail end of his speech. “Teach ‘em to *win*, not to lose. I don’t go for this defeatist stuff, it makes a kid think in terms of winning or losing. That’s sportsmanship, you can have it.” He glanced aside at us, then went on. “You teach a kid how to *win*] that’s the American way. Play hard, play fast and *win!*”

He finished, his face reflecting satisfaction with his philosophy as he turned to us. He nodded curtly at Bob, extended his beefy hand to me.

“Haven’t had a chance to talk to you man-to-man, Harper,” he said. “Glad you dropped by, boy.”

His bullish handshake sent needles of cutting fire into the raw flesh under my broken blisters and I couldn’t keep the grimace from my face.

“What’s wrong, boy?” he asked bluffly. “Too rough for ya?”

I told him it was blistered and he laughed. “Y’need a little toughenin’ up,” he said. “Summer’s hard work’ll do ya good. Sit down, boy, sit down.”

“Could I get a drink of water first?” I asked, and he shrugged and pointed in the general direction of the kitchen. As I headed for it, I wondered why I’d said that. I wasn’t thirsty at all. Maybe, I thought, I just wanted to get away from Nolan; or maybe I wanted to see Ellen Nolan again.

She was still at the sink, finishing up the dishes. She looked up with a friendly smile as I came in.

“May I get a drink?” I asked.

“Of course.” She gestured toward a cupboard with her hand. “The glasses are up there.”

As I stood close to her, running faucet water into the glass, I noticed, from the corners of my eyes, her looking at me. I turned to face her and she smiled quickly.

“Did your hands blister badly today?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Let me see,” she said. She held my hand in her warm palm. “Oh, that looks terrible,” she said concernedly. “You should have it treated.”

“At the dispensary?” I asked.

“No, I have some ointment in the house,” she said. “We can do it here.”

“What’s up, El?” Ed Nolan’s voice inquired loudly as we came into the living room. When Ellen told him, he scoffed. “Aaah, that’s nonsense. A few blisters never hurt anybody. Y’need toughening, boy.”

“I know,” I said politely, choosing concession as my guide to success with Big Ed Nolan. As I followed Ellen Nolan into the hallway, I heard Ed Nolan say to Bob, “You don’t like sports, do you, Dalrymple?” and Bob’s flustered, “Why ... sure, sure I do, Ed. I’m not too good at them, of course, but—”

“Uh-huh,” said Ed.

In the tiny bathroom, Ellen got boric acid ointment and a box of gauze.

“Go on in here,” Ellen said, flicking on the bedroom light. “Sit down.”

It gave me an odd sensation to sit on the bed beside Ellen Nolan. To hear her husband talking sports in the next room and see the picture of him, bulky in his football uniform hanging over the bed with the pennant *Carlyle Teacher's College* tacked under it. To feel the careful touch of her fingers on my palm and watch her serious face as she put on ointment then wrapped gauze around my hand and tied it.

“Like hers,” I said without thinking.

She glanced up at me. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said, “I was only....”

I didn't finish. I felt my heart thudding slowly, harshly. Her hands were like Julia's hands—warm and certain. I looked away from them.

“What sort of music will you teach the boys?” Ellen asked me.

“Oh, the usual run of camp songs,” I said. “I've worked with kids before—at other camps—and they don't seem to like anything but the easiest songs.”

She nodded. “I suppose so,” she said. “It's a pity you can't give them a music appreciation course though. You know, play records and discuss them.”

“Classical music?” I asked.

She nodded with a smile. “I think all people would like classical music if only they were exposed to it early enough,” she said.

“You like it?” I asked.

“I love it,” she said, “but my—” she hesitated for a revealing moment— “we don't have too many records,” she finished.

“What do you have?” I asked.

“I'll show you when we're through,” she said. “We have Tschaikowsky's—”

“What are ya doin', El?” Ed Nolan's voice came splashing over us like cold coffee and we both looked up to see him filling the doorway.

“I'm bandaging his hand, Ed,” Ellen said as if she were apologizing.

“Well, come on out,” he said irritably. “Our bedroom isn't a hospital, y'know.”

Ellen Nolan's voice was barely audible as she said, “All right.” I stood quickly, feeling restive under the flat gaze of Ed Nolan's eyes. For a moment, I hesitated between waiting to follow Ellen Nolan out and proceeding her. Then, as Ed stepped into the room and gestured once with his head, I moved abruptly for the doorway.

“We got a dispensary y'know,” Ed said, attempting to sound amused but failing. “Our bedroom isn't no blister hospital.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw the tight look on Ellen Nolan's face, the rising color in her cheeks. Then I saw Ed Nolan pinch her as she moved past him. She gasped suddenly and lurched so bad she would have fallen if he hadn't caught her arm.

“Take it easy, El,” said Big Ed, smirking. “You'll last longer.”

He came out after her and saw me standing in the middle of the living-room floor. “Sit down, boy,” he said.

“Mrs. Nolan said she was going to show me some records,” I said.

“Never mind that,” Ed said. “Sit down. I want to talk to you.”

Without a word, I sat down beside Bob, as Ellen Nolan moved back toward the kitchen.

“What are your plans for singin’ this summer?” Ed asked me. “I’ll tell you right now. I argued with the board against havin’ a music director so I’m gonna expect mighty good work from ya before I’m convinced.”

“Here’s what I’m planning,” I began.

As I spoke I could hear Ellen Nolan moving in the kitchen.

7.

“Tomorrow we’re gonna work on the cabins,” Ed Nolan told us at supper the next day, “and that’s *all* we’re gonna work on because I want those cabins in topnotch order by Wednesday morning when the campers arrive. Oh—” he conceded with a brusque gesture—“there may be a few odds and ends besides the cabins. A few of you cabin counselors may be assigned to other jobs but they’ll only last an hour or so. Your main job’ll be the cabins.”

In the morning, Ed Nolan grabbed my arm as I was leaving the dining hall.

“Say, listen, boy, would you do me a favor?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “What is it?”

“Well, we got all our work assigned for today but we’re still a couple o’ men short for helping clean up Paradise.”

“Oh?” I said.

“I thought maybe you and Dalrymple might pitch in and help up there for a little while,” said Big Ed.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll be glad to.”

“I’ll tell Doc Rainey then,” he said. “Tell your friend Dalrymple.”

“We’ll still be able to work on our cabins today, won’t we?” I asked as Big Ed started away.

“Sure, sure,” he tossed over his receding shoulder. “It’ll just be for a little while.”

When I told Bob about it, I saw the tightening of angry suspicion knit his features.

“That son-of-a-bitch is out to get us,” he said. “He’ll have us up there all day.”

“If he does, he’s cutting his own throat,” I said. “He’s the one who wants the cabins done by tomorrow morning.”

“He’ll expect them done by tomorrow morning too,” Bob said.

For an hour we worked down the long, facing rows of toilets, Bob humming a minor transposition of “Stranger in Paradise,” as he scrubbed and flushed and scrubbed again.

“There is beauty here,” he announced once, straightening up, dripping brush in hand.

“There is intangible loveliness, grace, symmetry — a formlessness of unspeakable glory.”

“There is a strong odor,” I conceded.

“Callow youth,” he said sadly, “who do not see this moment in its true significance. *Hark*! He flushed. “It is the rushing of a crystal stream, a torrent of summer madness. Ah, it is Niagara, Victoria!”

“It is a toilet flushing,” I said, still cleaning.

“You miss the point, fellow,” he said. “The moment escapes you.” He belched echoingly.

“It is the horn of Rolande summoning Charlemagne,” I said.

“You’ve got it,” he said. “Sit on it.” He sang, “*Once you have found it, never let it go. Once you have found it—*”

Morning passed. There was only one other person working with us —a limp-armed dishwasher from the kitchen who mopped at the floor as if he were playing shuffleboard. By dinnertime, Paradise was still not regained from a winter’s neglect.

Ellen was in the dining hall when we got there.

All through the meal, she kept looking at the table, only twice looking up, seeing me, and quickly lowering her eyes. Near the end of the meal, while Ed was telling us how slowly he thought the cabins were getting done and how, by God, we had better get into high gear and clean them up if it took all night—I looked at Ellen again and this time she didn’t lower her waiting eyes. Instead, there was a moment—it seemed long; it probably lasted three seconds—a moment in which her eyes almost spoke to me—asking me to understand.

“Let’s tell Doc,” Bob said when Ed’s talk was done, chopping away my thoughts of her and bringing me back again to the little prison of present difficulties; namely, getting our cabins done.

We went over to Doc Rainey and told him.

“We’ll never get our cabin ready if we don’t start soon,” Bob complained. “We haven’t even touched them.”

Doc Rainey nodded, his face understanding. “I’ll talk to Ed,” he said. “I’m sure we can get somebody up there so you can get your cabins ready.”

We waited while he talked to Big Ed, watching Ed gesture with a stump of cigar, as he explained. Finally they came over to us.

“Look here, boys,” Ed said, “I don’t wanna get tough or anything but you got a job to do so let’s stop belly-achin’ and *do* it.”

“What about our cabins, Mister Nolan?” I asked.

“Listen, Harper,” he said, “you two should have finished up Paradise hours ago. You’re just wastin’ time. The sooner you get the job done, the sooner you’ll get to your cabins.”

Thus spurred on, we returned to Paradise. Jokes did not set in that afternoon. We worked as quickly and efficiently as possible, mopping the floors, cleaning the sinks, dusting the walls, putting in fresh bulbs, rolls of paper, bringing up supplies from the lodge—cleaning disinfectant, paper, soap, etc.

By three-thirty I tossed my mop into the utility closet and said, “Come on, that’s it. We

better work on those damn cabins.”

Sid came by as I finished prying the wooden planks from over the door and letting down the shutters.

“Jesus, you’re just starting?” he asked, looking mildly pained.

I told him about Paradise.

“I know,” he said. “I don’t blame you but ... oh, the hell.” He pulled off his sweat shirt, got a pail of soapy water and a mop and started working on the cabin floor while I broomed cobwebs from the outside eaves, changed the bulb and got mattresses from the lodge.

At four-thirty, the swim period was honkingly announced. Sid looked at me questioningly.

“I’ll keep working,” I told him. “Might as well get the damn thing over with.” He nodded and smiled briefly.

Nolan came by a few minutes later and stood on the porch steps, eating a candy bar and looking in.

“Got a long way to go,” he said through a caramel and nut-filled mouth.

I managed not to say anything.

“Paradise in topnotch order?” asked Big Ed.

“Yes,” I answered bluntly.

“I’ll take a look later on.” He chewed noisily on his candy bar. “Say, Goldberg, come down the office with me, will ya? I want to go over the list of your campers with ya and tell ya about them.”

“Well...” Sid put down the mop. “Harper has a lot to do yet,” he said.

“That’s Harper’s job, not yours,” Big Ed said. “Come on.”

Sid left the cabin, grabbing his sweat shirt from the big, gnarled stump in front of the cabin. I stood barefoot on the soap-swirled floor, mop handle in limp clutch, looking out of the cabin.

By supper I had the floors done, the bunks set up. That left only the painting of the shutters and the locating and lugging up from the lodge of the seven trunks that belonged to my cabin group.

Bob and I sat by Merv at supper, neither of us talking much.

“You both look shot,” Merv said. “Like men back from the dead.”

“We’re not back yet,” Bob said.

“Large Edward on your tail?” Merv asked me and I nodded. “This is a position you’ll learn to assume automatically in time,” he said amusedly. “After a while you won’t even notice it.”

“This I doubt,” I said.

I looked for Ellen at supper but she was absent again. I decided to drop by the Nolan cabin later if I were finished working.

“Say, Harper,” Big Ed said to me at the door, “I took a look at Paradise before.” He shook his head. “It’s kind o’ sloppy, boy, not a topnotch job by a long shot.”

"I'm sorry," I said, as evenly as possible.

Big Ed nodded patronizingly. "Well, we'll let it go this time, Harper. But you got to get in high gear. Counselin's no picnic, y'know."

"Yes," I said, "I know."

"Well, I won't keep ya from your work." He patted me on the shoulder. "Check ya later."

I spent the evening painting the shutters by flashlight. About eight-thirty, Big Ed lumbered by.

"Now it's getting done," he said. I grunted. "Don't forget the trunks," he said. "And, when you're at it you might as well go over the beams." He pointed up at the ceiling. "Looks like a lot o' dust up there."

"Yes," I said, "I will."

At ten I began lugging up the trunks. By ten-thirty I was done. I took a shower and got into my pajamas; turned out the light and crawled exhaustedly between the sheets.

I lay there in the darkness thinking about Julia. About our years together, our engagement, our wedding plans.

Her funeral.

I wondered when it was going to leave me — this cold, sickening despair. She was dead and buried. Face that, a friend had told me months before. Face it and you can live with it. Ignore it and it will kill you. It was killing me. Over a year had passed since the auto accident; and the gaping hole was still there in my life. Nothing seemed to mend it.

The buses arrived a little after one that afternoon. Dinner had been served at eleven-thirty so we'd all be ready and tensed for the onslaught. From twelve-thirty on, we gathered in the open area in front of the dining hall, waiting.

About one o'clock, the first audible signs of the terrible approach reached our ears. Almost unnoticeably, the sound impinged, increasing in volume gradually like distant surf. The noise grew louder, louder and then, with a flash of yellow side and windows alive with arms and heads, the first thick-tired bus turned in off the road and a burst of cheering dinned in our ears.

Then the second bus turned in and the first one ground to a whining halt in front of the dining hall, ejecting a torrent of yelling boys carrying baseball hats, tennis rackets, bows and arrows, suitcases, inner tubes, footballs, duffle bags, knapsacks and one book. The second bus drew up, braked and cascaded more little boys. Then the third bus, the fourth and, in a minute, the area was interwoven with the dashing and jumping of one hundred and twenty-six vari-sized campers. The air rang with their cheers, yells, hoots of recognition, and general noisemaking.

Which pandemonium faded only after Doc Rainey had whistle-blown his face to a mottled purple. Even then, movement did not cease but went on, a tireless series of wriggling hoppings, punchings of arms, ticklings, pokings and repressed gigglings.

"All right, now!" Doc Rainey's voice rose courageously above the squirming, bright-eyed throng. "Line up for cabin assignments!"

The initial attempt of the boys to carry out this instruction paralleled a meeting of two armies—the first composed of dogs, the second of cats. The feverish shrilling of Doc Rainey's whistle finally brought motionless silence to the red-faced, tangled gang.

"All right—*take it easy!*" Doc Rainey implored. "Slowly! Counselors, help! Line up everyone in two rows!"

After a sweat raising formation tactic, the boys finally stood in two wavering, occasional cracking lines. Doc's whistle pierced the air again and the boys gulped down noise into themselves. Whereupon Doc called out each individual name and told them to go and stand with their counselor. Thus it was that in forty-five minutes, I had my seven boys standing around me—my Chester Wickerly, a pudgy, freckled-faced 6-B Cagliostro; my Mood brothers, Jim and Roger, both lean and wearing shorts, both chewing gum, both carrying identical tennis rackets; my Martin Gingold, short, fat, slickly black-haired and wearing a red sweat shirt bearing the awesome title—*172nd Street Eagles*; my David Lewis, a good-looking little boy with that scared and transparent expression of the boy who has never been away from Mama; Charles Barnett, a husky, self-assured towhead; and finally my Anthony Rocca, a skinny, pale-faced runt, staring big-eyed at everything going on, mouth slightly gaping, lugging over his shoulder a *Louisville Slugger* that would have given Babe Ruth trouble. My heavenly seven.

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