

Robert Lipsyte

ONE FAT SUMMER

By the best-selling author of *The Contender*



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Robert Lipsyte

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For Sam and Susannah

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I always hated summertime. When people take off their clothes. In winter you can hide yourself. Long coats, heavy jackets, thick sweaters. Nobody can tell how fat you really are. But in the summertime they can see your thick legs and your wobbly backside and your big belly and your soft arms. And they laugh.

I never would have gone to the Rumson Lake Community Association Carnival on the Fourth of July if it hadn't been cool enough that night to wear a long-sleeved knit shirt outside my pants. At the start of that summer, my fourteenth, I couldn't button the waist of any of my pants without getting a stomachache. I weighed more than 200 pounds on July 4th. I don't know exactly how much more because I jumped off the bathroom scale when the number 200 rolled up. The numbers were still climbing past the pointer when I bailed out.

I was tall for my age and I had large, heavy bones, so I didn't look like a circus freak. Just like a very fat boy. When my pants weren't strangling my belly, and if there were no scales or mirrors around, I could forget for a while that I was fat. But sooner or later there'd be someone around to remind me. The wise guys started up as soon as we got to the carnival, at Marino's Beach Club and Snack Bar.

"Hey, it's the Crisco Kid," yelled one of the older teenagers hanging around the snack bar.

"Why do you call him the Crisco Kid?" It sounded like a comedy routine. I knew what was coming.

"Because he's fat in the can."

They all laughed. My face got hot, but I pretended I hadn't heard. Rule number one: never let people know they can get to you or they'll never stop trying. Joanie pretended she hadn't heard, either.

"Look at that girl he's with. The nose knows."

"She's the one who blew the wind in."

I felt embarrassed for Joanie. Someday I'd wake up thin, I believed that. But poor Joanie was stuck with that nose for her whole life. It was long and crooked. The rest of her face was pretty, but who ever looked at the rest of her face?

"Hey, let's go to the booths," she said. "I feel lucky tonight." Joanie was a terrific pretender, too.

It was early, there was still light in the sky, and the crowds hadn't arrived yet. Strings of colored bulbs danced in the breeze off the lake. The jukebox was playing "Little White Cloud That Cried."

"There's that dumb song again," I said.

"It's not so bad when you're in the mood," said Joanie.

"I'm only in the mood when I've got an umbrella."

"That's a joke, son," said Joanie. "It was only funny the first twenty-seven times you said it."

"Then how come you never laughed?"

"Ha-ha. Okay?"

Then we both laughed.

I've known Joanie since we were three years old. Our parents were best friends. In the city we

lived in the same apartment house and we were always in the same classes in school. Somewhere there's a picture of us taking a bath together when we were four. It's cute. I wasn't so fat then, and her nose wasn't so huge. Joanie and I not only grew up together, we grew *out* together. That's my joke, but I've never told it to her.

A few years ago, when my parents bought a summer house on Rumson Lake, her parents bought one, too. And after that we were together summer and winter. She taught me to dance, but I never danced with anyone except her. We did our homework together. When her father took her mother on a business trip, Joanie stayed at my house.

Joanie and I talked about almost everything; she was a great talker, but only with me. Otherwise she was shy. The only things in the world we didn't talk about were her nose and my fat. When we were alone together I felt thin, and I think she felt pretty. I guess that's why we were such good friends.

"Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, the wheel of fortune is spinning, spinning, spinning. For one thin dime you can win a beautiful doll to call your own." It was Pete Marino himself, as usual, dressed in nothing except a little bathing suit and a St. Christopher medal around his neck. He was pointing at us. "Now here's a couple of gamblers. Step right up, folks, you look lucky to me."

"Let's go try the ringtoss," I said. Muscles like Pete Marino's gave me a stomachache. Cannonball muscles with big blue veins over them. I didn't have any muscles, and my veins were buried in fat.

Joanie slapped a dime on number fourteen.

"I thought six was your lucky number."

"Not anymore. My age is my lucky number now."

"Round and round it goes, where it stops nobody knows," chanted Pete Marino. He was waving his arms at the wheel and doing a little dance. He must have known how all the muscles on his back twitched and jumped under his smooth bronze skin.

"He's not conceited," I said. "He's convinced."

"C'mon, he's very nice," said Joanie. But then she looked at me. "He's not as smart as you, though."

"The wheel is slowing down, soon we'll have a winner. Who's it gonna be?" He turned around grinning. He had big white teeth, like Chiclets, and curly golden hair. He looked like a movie star. "Who'll be the lucky one?"

Joanie's dime was the only one on the counter. A few people drifted over to watch. The wheel stopped on fourteen. Joanie started to scream, then put her hands over her mouth.

"A winner!" Pete Marino looked happier than she did. "The first winner of the evening." He waved at a row of stuffed animals. "Take your pick, sweetheart."

Joanie picked an enormous pink teddy bear. Pete made a big deal of getting it down and presenting it to her.

"Do we have to lug that around all night?" I asked. "Can't we leave it here and pick it up later?"

"You don't have to carry it," said Joanie.

"Hey, folks, you can bring it back a little later and I'll hold it for you," said Pete, "but it would help business if you walk around with it for a little while. All proceeds go to the community association, you know."

"Sure," said Joanie.

"Thanks, honey." He gave her a big, sexy wink. What did he have to do that for? He's eighteen years old, maybe nineteen, a sophomore in college. On a swimming scholarship, of course.

“Hey, big fella.” He gave me the same wink exactly. “Take care of that little lady, you’ve got a real winner there.”

Actually, I knew he was a nice guy. He wouldn’t remember it, but he talked to me a couple of years ago. The summer the Marino family opened the Beach Club, Pete gave some free swimming lessons, and I went a few times. He told me I had the makings of a really good swimmer, and I should stick with it. But I started feeling embarrassed in a bathing suit about then, and I never did.

Joanie and I strolled along the beach where the booths were set up. People stared at the big pink teddy bear. Usually I hate it when people stare at me, but this was kind of fun.

“You know,” I said to Joanie, “we have to get going on our project. We don’t even have an idea yet.”

“We’ll think of something,” she said.

She didn’t seem too enthusiastic, but you couldn’t be sure about Joanie. She didn’t like anyone, even me, to know what was going on inside her. She tried to keep the same expression on her face whether she was happy or sad. And she was sarcastic a lot to cover up. You had to understand her.

We walked around for awhile and tried a few more booths. Ringtoss, the baseball throw, a different wheel of fortune. Nothing. I steered her away from the shooting gallery because the great punks from the snack bar were hanging out there now, cheering for a tall, skinny guy in brown combat boots and a Marine fatigue hat, who was puncturing the balloons with a BB rifle faster than Pete’s older brother, Vinnie, could blow them up. What a marksman.

The jukebox played “Any Time” by Eddie Fisher, and a few couples began dancing on the wooden dock where the rowboats and canoes were tied up. People were pouring in. From a distance I saw my parents and Joanie’s parents come in together. A few guys turned to look at a really built girl with long black hair. She was wearing a Barnard College sweatshirt and red shorts. One of the guys whistled, but she ignored him. Then I realized it was only my sister, Michelle.

There was a scream from Pete Marino’s booth, and a woman began waving a black-and-white panda. Another winner.

“We can take the teddy bear back now,” I said to Joanie.

“It’s not so heavy.” She was hugging it.

“You going to carry it around all night? Where you going to put it when we eat?”

“Bob?” Joanie was just about the only person who called me Bob. Usually it was Bobby or Robert or some other things. “We won’t be able to start our project right away.”

“Well, if you want to take a few days’ vacation, that’s okay. We’ve got all summer.”

“I was going to call you tomorrow. We’re going back to the city,” she said.

“What for?”

“We have to go back.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. Maybe two weeks.”

“How come?”

“We just have to, that’s all.” Her mouth snapped shut. Case closed. She’d be a great spy. You could torture her, if she didn’t want to talk, forget it.

“Well, what am I supposed to do?”

“Stand on your head and spit nickels, how should I know?”

“Boy, you sure took your nasty pills this morning. I was counting on doing this project. You said in the city you’d do it, we told the teacher.” I felt my summer plans crumbling under me. I had figured the project, an extra-credit paper for economics or civics about local businesses or government, would

keep my father off my back till Labor Day.

“You could start it without me,” she said.

“Oh, boy, this is really going to mess things up for me.”

“Well, I’m coming back. It’s only a couple of weeks, you said we had the whole summer.”

“But you don’t understand. He’s not going to let me hang around for a couple of weeks.”

“Your father?”

“I had to talk myself blue in the face about the project; I even told him that the teacher *assigned* it to us, that if we didn’t do it we wouldn’t get into the Honor Society.”

“Why’d you tell him that?”

“He wants me to go to day camp.”

“You’re too old for day camp.”

“As a junior counselor. You still have to pay, but they let you help out with the little kids. Big deal.”

“He didn’t make you go last year.”

“Yeah, but he’s going to be in the city most of the summer, just coming up on weekends, and Michelle’s working at camp, and my mother’s going to be busy every day studying to be a teacher. He says I have to be doing something.”

“Which camp?”

“He gave me a big choice. Mohawk Hill or Happy Valley.”

“Some choice.”

“The pit or the pendulum. What’s so important in the city?”

“Maybe you could be a junior counselor for a couple of weeks,” she said.

“I don’t want to go to camp for a minute. Besides, you have to pay for the whole summer advance. You know my father, once he pays for something, that’s it. Remember the pickled beets?”

“I can still taste them.” That got a little smile out of her.

I could still taste them too. It seemed like we ate them every meal for the whole winter. My father thought he was getting five cases of different vegetables, but they were all beets. And when he couldn’t get his money back, we just had to eat them all up.

“I’ll tell you a secret about those beets,” I lowered my voice. “That whole winter, my pee was red.”

“Oh, Bob.” She laughed. I felt a little better.

“Can’t you do anything? You could stay at my house while your folks are in the city. You could sleep in Michelle’s room, she wouldn’t mind. Or you could have my room and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“No, I have to go, too.”

“What are you going to do there?”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” she said.

“But satisfaction brought him back.”

“Well, why don’t you start the project?”

“That wouldn’t be any fun,” I said. “Besides, he’d never go for that. He’d think I’d just fool around if you weren’t doing it, too. He doesn’t have much confidence in me.”

“Maybe you could get a job for a couple of weeks.”

“Oh, sure.”

“There are always ads for jobs on the bulletin board by the snack bar.”

“To watch little kids at the beach.”

“So what’s wrong with that for a couple of weeks? At least it would keep you out of camp.”

~~I couldn’t answer that truthfully, even to Joanie. It would be as bad as camp. You’ve got to wear a bathing suit and go in the water, or at least shorts and a T-shirt. It’s bad enough when older kids call you fatso. When five-year-olds do it...~~

“I hate little kids,” I said.

“How about cutting lawns?” she asked.

“Who would hire me?”

“You could lie about your age. You do look older.”

“You need junior working papers. Your age is right on the papers.”

“You don’t need them to cut lawns. C’mon, let’s see what’s on the bulletin board.”

“Let’s eat first.”

“Right now?”

“Skip it. I’ll figure something out,” I said.

“Nothing doing, you made the big deal about me letting you down....”

“I never said that.”

“You thought that.”

“What are you, a mind reader or something?”

“Yep. C’mon. Move.” Joanie was tough. I’m really tougher, but I let her lead me to the snack bar because I knew she felt bad about letting me down.

“Hey.” The punks were back. “What time does the balloon go up?”

“Think you could hit that balloon, Willie?”

Willie, the tall skinny marksman, took a pack of Lucky Strikes out of his fatigue hat and shook out a cigarette. “He looks more like a beach ball to me.” He wore his blond hair in a duck’s ass, high on top, long and pointy in the back.

Joanie was at the bulletin board. “Here’s one. ‘Boy wanted to maintain large estate. One dollar an hour. Call RU-9-4849.’”

“I’ll call tomorrow. From home.”

“Call now.”

“I don’t have a nickel.”

“Here.” She handed me a nickel.

“After we eat.”

“You want me to dial for you?”

Willie strolled over. He snapped open a Zippo and lit his cigarette. “You sure your fingers’ll fit into the dial?” The hoody-looking boys and girls behind him snickered.

“Let’s go,” I whispered to Joanie.

“Call now,” she said out loud.

“Call now,” mimicked Willie.

Joanie whirled on him. “Why don’t you crawl back into your hole.”

“Don’t point that nose at me. It might be loaded.” His gang laughed.

“Hey, folks.” Pete Marino walked up. Willie took a step backward. “Did you want to leave the bear while you’re eating?”

“It’s all right.” Joanie was hugging it very tightly.

“She needs it, it’s her date,” said Willie.

Pete Marino never stopped smiling. “Take a hike, Rummie.”

“It’s a free country,” said Willie. He blew a smoke ring. “And I fought for it, college boy.”

Pete didn't say a word. But his muscles seemed to swell and the long blue veins down his arm stood out.

"Willie?" One of the girls touched his arm. "Let's ride over to Lenape Falls. This place is dead."

Willie took his time finishing his cigarette. He flicked the butt at the ground near my feet. Joanie and I watched them swagger to the parking lot and pile into a souped-up blue-and-white Chevrolet. Willie gunned the car onto the county road. Long after we couldn't see it anymore, we heard it roaring into the night.

Pete was gone. My legs felt weak.

"No more excuses," said Joanie. "Call."

I had no energy to argue with her. A man's voice answered on the second ring. "Dr. Kahn speaking. Yes?"

"I'm calling about the lawn job. I saw your sign on the bulletin board at the snack bar."

"Are you experienced?"

"Experienced?" I looked at Joanie. She nodded her head furiously. "Yes."

"Come over Sunday afternoon and we'll talk. Do you know where I am?"

"No."

"At the north end of Rumson Lake, toward Lenape Falls. My name's on the mailbox. What's your name?"

"Robert Marks."

He hung up.

"Well?"

I was casual. "Sunday afternoon I'm going for an interview."

"See?"

"That doesn't mean I'll get the job."

"He hardly asked anything about you. He must be desperate for someone to cut his lawn. He'll hire anybody."

"Thanks a million."

"You know what I mean." She hit my arm with the teddy bear's leg. That was very affectionate for Joanie. "Now we can go eat."

We ran into her parents on the way to the hot dog stand. They seemed nervous and anxious to leave, and they wanted her to go home with them. Usually Joanie puts up a fight, and usually she gets her way, but this time her mother whispered something in her ear, and Joanie just nodded and followed them out. She asked me to stop by Sunday and tell her if I got the job.

I ate about five hot dogs and drank two cream sodas before my sister caught me. Michelle was always needling me to lose weight. She started up again, but when the loudspeaker blared an announcement for Pete Marino's diving exhibition we followed the crowd to the dock. We watched him climb slowly to the top of the platform and step out on the twenty-foot highboard. I got a stomachache just seeing someone up that high. He smiled and waved.

"He's not conceited," said Michelle. "He's convinced."

"He's a nice guy," I said.

"How would you know?"

"I know."

"You never even talked to him."

"That's what you think." Usually when I say that she makes a face and walks away. Not this time.

"Prove it," she said.

“Prove I don’t. You’re going to college next year, you know all the answers.”

~~She sighed. “I guess you will be a writer when you grow up. If you ever grow up. You’re such a liar already.”~~

“Okay, big mouth, listen to this.” I told her how Pete moved in so cool and easy when Willie and his gang were giving us a hard time. I made a few changes here and there, nothing too important. I didn’t mention the phone call to Dr. Kahn, and I made it seem as if Pete and I had stood side by side, face down the gang.

“We should thank him,” said Michelle. She thinks she’s got such smooth moves, but she never fools me, not for a minute.

“He’s just dying to meet you. He asked me who was that girl wearing the *Ber-nard* shirt, and I said it was the name of your steady boyfriend.”

“You’re funny like a crutch.”

“Take a hike, big mouth. And don’t use me to get yourself a date.” I didn’t say it loud enough for her to catch every single word.

She made a face and walked away. I found my parents, and we watched Pete dive a few times. He was merely great. They said they were going home. I didn’t feel like walking up our hill, so I rode back with them. They were arguing about something, but I wasn’t listening. I was thinking about the job, and about the way Pete handled Willie. Let Michelle thank him if she wanted to. It was dumb. Thanking him would be like thanking the Lone Ranger.

The first time I ever saw Dr. Kahn's lawn it looked like a velvet sea, a green velvet sea that flowed up from the gray shore of the county road to surround a great white house with white columns. The house looked like a proud clipper ship riding the crest of the ocean. As I trudged up from the county road I made out the figure of a man standing on the front porch, the captain on the bridge of his ship. As I got closer, I saw he was rocking an old-fashioned baby carriage. I could hear children yelling from somewhere behind the house, and the laughter of grown-ups.

When I got to the porch I had to stand still and take deep breaths. My knees were quivering and my stomach boiling. My face was on fire. My tongue was swollen and dry.

The man just stared at me. His eyes were black and deep and set close together, like shotgun barrels. His lips were so thin his mouth looked like a slit for old razor blades. Finally, he spoke.

"You're the boy who called about the lawn job."

"Yek." My mouth was so dry it was the best I could do.

He stopped rocking the carriage and leaned forward. He was wearing a white shirt without a tie, black pants and red-leather slippers.

"What's your name?"

"Robert Marks."

"Where do you live?"

"Across the lake."

"How did you get here?"

"I walked."

"On such a hot day. That shows enterprise. I like a boy with enterprise. Are you an all-year rounder?"

"I'm from the city. We come up summers."

"How old are you?"

I had carefully rehearsed this answer. "Fever-teen," I mumbled.

"Speak up, speak up."

I swallowed and lied. "Seventeen."

The baby in the carriage began to cry and Dr. Kahn started rocking it again. I felt seasick. "You will receive seventy-five cents an hour. Dr. Kahn pays top dollar. But you'll work for it. Oh, you'll work for it."

A little girl in a blue playsuit ran past the porch chasing a rolling ball. She waved at Dr. Kahn and he waved back.

"You'll make this place look beautiful for the weekends. You'll cut the lawn, trim the hedges, rake the gravel, weed the rock garden. You'll wash the car, mop the pool deck, clean the garbage pail. And whatever else needs to be done." His eyes snapped shut and open like window shades. "Of course I have a gardening service come on Fridays for the skilled work. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

“You’ll be here at nine o’clock sharp every weekday morning, beginning tomorrow. You’ll bring your own lunch. You’ll work until three o’clock sharp in the afternoon. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will see you here tomorrow at nine A.M. Sharp.” The shotgun eyes became deeper, blacker, closer. “How old did you say you were?”

This time I didn’t have to lie. “I said I was seventeen.”

He began nodding his head in rhythm to the rocking. “You are extremely fat for seventeen.”

Then he turned his back on me and looked into the carriage.

I floated down the gravel driveway. If I had any breath to spare I would have sung as I walked on the shoulder of the county road that circles the lake. I was going to stop off at Joanie’s house to tell her the good news but something happened that made me forget. A car pulled up alongside me, a souped-up blue-and-white Chevrolet with a row of cherries painted on the door.

“Hey. You. Got a license?”

“Me?”

“I asked you if you had a license, fats.” The car was packed with laughing faces, but the only thing I could see clearly was a long thin arm hanging out of the driver’s window. It was tat-tooeed with a Marine Corps insignia and the name Willie.

“A license?”

“Yeah, for that trailer you’re hauling behind you.”

The car rocked with laughter. Willie poked out his pointed rat face. “Listen, fats, if I catch you around the lake again without a license for that big can of yours, I’ll run you right back to the city where you belong.”

The car screeched off, and my nose and mouth were filled with the stink of burning rubber.

At breakfast my father asked, “Well, Robert, have you made up your mind?”

“Not yet.” I drank my orange juice in two swallows. It’s the only way to drink cold, fresh squeezed orange juice. You fill your mouth with it to wash away all the cotton from sleep, then gulp down, feel it rush down your pipes and splash into your stomach, whoosh. It also drives my father up the wall, and I was hoping he’d start giving me the usual lesson in table manners and forget the cross examination. No such luck.

“When do you plan to reach a decision?”

“Soon.”

“That’s not soon enough.”

“What’s soon enough?” I asked.

“You’ll get shut out of everything if you don’t step on it.” He was making a big show of being patient. But his muscles were popping along his jaw. My father’s thin, but he’s got muscles and veins everywhere. “You’ll have nothing to do all summer. No camp, no swim classes, nothing. You’ll have nothing to do but hang around and feel sorry for yourself. And eat.”

“Hot stuff,” said my mother, bringing plates of bacon and scrambled eggs to the table. Great timing.

“Where’s Michelle?” snapped my father.

“Here’s Michelle,” said Michelle. Her face was still swollen from sleep. She was rubbing her eyes. I wondered what time she came home from her counselors’ meeting last night.

“This isn’t a restaurant,” said my father.

“I’m glad to hear that,” said my mother.

I started to eat. There’s really only one way to eat scrambled eggs, bacon and toast, and this is the way: First, you shovel a heaping forkful of eggs into your mouth, feel the butter run inside your gums, press the soft little clumps of egg against the roof of your mouth with your tongue, then poke in a crispy, crackly bacon stick, chew until the bacon is scattered through the mouthful of eggs, then jam a bite of crunchy toast, and chew slowly, making sure your lips are closed so nothing leaks out. So and hard, buttery and burnt, all pressing against the inside of your cheeks. A full mouth. And it’s only the first.

It’s even better when your father isn’t staring at you in disgust.

“Robert. I don’t think you’re taking this seriously.”

“Yesum.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

I had to swallow ahead of schedule. “Why do I have to make plans all the time? I’m on vacation.”

“A man has to do something with his life. The sooner you start the better.”

“Let him finish his breakfast, Marty,” said my mother.

“Well, Robert?” asked my father.

“Maybe I’ll get a job,” I said.

He snorted. "Be serious."

~~If I had any thought of telling him about Dr. Kahn. I cancelled it right then. Even if he let me do it, what a big deal. Robert, you will wear steel-tipped shoes so you don't cut off your clumsy toes, and goggles for your eyes and heavy gloves for your fat little fingers. A helmet! Perhaps a complete set of armor. And I'd clank off to work, and get fired, and everybody would feel sorry for me, and be real nice. Poor Bobby, cut from the team again. I'd been through it all before. He didn't have much confidence in me.~~

"Personally," said my father, "and it's all your decision, I lean toward Mohawk Hill. There seem to be more physical activity there, and they don't have ice cream in the afternoon."

"Marty, his eggs are getting cold, let him eat."

"It's for his own good, Lenore. He's not going to thank you ten years from now when he weighs three hundred pounds."

Michelle jumped up. "Hey. I'm going to be late, I'm going to miss my bus." She kissed my father's cheek. "Have a good week. See you Friday night."

I silently thanked her for changing the subject, but then she said, "Keep your chins up, Bobby." She charged out.

"I better get going, too," said my father. He stood up. "Get on the stick, Robert." He mussed my hair. He went back to his room to finish dressing.

My mother said, "Ride into town with me. I'm going to do some shopping, we can have lunch out."

"No, thanks, I think I'll walk around the lake, maybe stop off at Joanie's."

"I'll drop you."

"I'd like the exercise."

"You'll watch the traffic, Bobby."

"That's what I'll do this summer. Watch the traffic."

"Lenore!"

"Coming. Bobby, I'll see you later. We'll figure something out together."

She kissed me and hurried out to the driveway. My father was already on his way to the car. The always had a big good-bye scene at the railroad station. You'd think he was going off to war. Big deal. Five days sitting behind a desk in an air-conditioned office. He probably goes to the movies every night. And eats in restaurants where he can order anything he wants. Of course he never gains a pound. In his life, I'm sure he never held his breath while buttoning his shirt. Or had to wear his shirt outside his pants because the zipper wouldn't come all the way up.

I finished breakfast and cleared the table. My Monday-morning chore. Then I packed myself lunch, a couple of salami sandwiches, an orange, an apple, a few cookies, nothing too heavy, and got dressed in sneakers, a long-sleeved shirt and dungarees that almost fit.

Be serious, huh? A man has to do something with his life, huh? Betcha I work harder today than you do, Dad.

Rumson Lake is round with an island in the middle. The island has trees and an abandoned wooden shack. I'd never been on the island, but a lot of couples went there at night to make out. At night you could see the light of campfires. When there's a full moon, you could see canoes and rowboats bobbing along the shore of the island.

This morning the only action around the island was Vinnie and Pete Marino swimming their laps. Each of them had a red inner tube jerking along behind, tied to an ankle by rope. In case of a cramp all they'd have to do is grab the tube and paddle in. Even great swimmers can get a cramp and drown.

The Marinos became great swimmers because their oldest sister, Connie, got polio one summer. She spent months in the hospital, and when she went home she had to wear a brace on one leg. The doctors said she would never walk normally again. Mrs. Marino prayed for her recovery every single morning, in church. Then one day Mr. Marino, a big tough guy who owns a cement company in the city, went to church and told God that all he wanted out of life was to dance with Connie at his wedding, and if God did that for him then God could do anything he wanted with him.

I heard this story from my parents who heard it from Mr. Marino at a Community Association meeting.

Well, Mr. Marino heard a voice telling him to take Connie to the waters. Mrs. Marino thought it meant some place with holy waters, like Lourdes, but Mr. Marino said it meant Rumson Lake. And for the whole next summer every member of the family took turns holding Connie in the water; and finally she could only float, and then she could kick her bad leg a little, and by the end of that summer she was swimming. The next summer she was walking by herself, and now she hardly has a limp at all. That was ten years ago.

Because of all that swimming, everybody got to be pretty good. Vinnie was the star of his high school team, and Pete was the city butterfly champion. There's another brother coming up who's supposed to be the best of them all. If I do become a writer someday, that'll make a good story for the *Reader's Digest*.

I watched the Marinos for a minute. They glided through the water like sharks, fast and steady, their arms cutting the water with every little splash. A light breeze stirred the water, and the morning sun glistened on the small, silvery waves.

I felt really good striding around the lake on the county road. The breeze was in my face, and I swung my arms in rhythm with my legs. A couple of times I waved to truck drivers. They always waved back. Someday I might drive a truck, a big one, with my sleeves rolled up to my shoulders and a baseball cap pulled down over my eyes. Truck drivers have adventures. Jack Smith, who used to drive a laundry truck, once jumped out of his rig, ran into a burning house and saved a baby. When he got back to the garage the foreman started yelling at him for coming late. The way I heard the story from Joanie, Jack just stared at the foreman; he never said a word about what had happened, just sucked on his cigarette like Humphrey Bogart until the foreman was finished yelling. Then he threw his cigarette on the ground, rubbed it out with the toe of his boot, and knocked out the foreman with

one punch. What a man! The boss was watching and fired Jack on the spot. Jack just turned and walked away. The next morning, when the boss read in the newspaper what Jack had done, he drove the trailer where he lived and offered him his old job back, with a big raise. Jack told him what he could do with his job. I heard somewhere that Jack Smith has his own business now. I've got that story filed in the back of my mind, too. It would make a good short story for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

I reached Dr. Kahn's lawn at exactly 8:47 by my wristwatch. It was probably 8:48. My watch always runs a minute slow because of my metabolism. That's the speed at which your body burns up energy. Once I took a test called a Basal Metabolism. I lay in a doctor's office for an hour breathing into a rubber mouthpiece connected by a tube to a machine. My nose was clipped shut. Afterward, the doctor said I had a low normal Basal Metabolism, which means my body burns up food a little slower than most other bodies. That's why I put on weight easily. The doctor made a joke about it. He said I could walk into a bakery, and if I took too deep a breath, I'd gain a pound. My father and Michel have high Basal Metabolisms, which means they could eat a pound of cake and burn it right off. That's why they're always bothering me about my weight, they don't understand the problem. My mother is normal Basal Metabolism, so she sort of understands. The doctor told her that I'd probably start losing weight sometime in my teens, so she doesn't make such a big fuss about it. She's had a few arguments with my father about my weight. She thinks he needles me about it too much. I think my father's sort of ashamed of having a fat son. He wants me to be lean and athletic like he is.

I made it up Dr. Kahn's gravel driveway in under nine minutes. 8:57 A.M.

He was waiting for me on the porch steps and looking at his watch.

"Two minutes late," he said. He must be a high Basal. "I don't like tardiness in a boy. See that doesn't happen again. You'll work until 3:02 P.M."

"Yes, sir." No point making a federal case on my first day. I hadn't saved a baby or anything.

"Follow me."

We walked around the back of the house past a swimming pool. The place was deserted. We walked into a toolshed that was as big as some of the cottages around the lake. It was dark and cool in the shed. Hanging from the walls, in neat rows, were rakes, shovels, hoes, pitchforks, clean and shining in the dim light. I couldn't wait to get my hands on them. My father never let me use his garden tools, he thought I would break them or leave them out in the rain to get rusty. Just give me a good shovel and I'll make the dirt fly. I felt excited. Dr. Kahn pointed toward a green motorized lawnmower. I had never worked a power mower before. At home we had a hand mower. It was rusty from all the nights I left it out.

"You know how to operate this?"

"Sure."

"Pull it out."

I dragged the mower out of the shed. It was much heavier than it looked.

"Each morning, before you begin, you'll clean the blade, and check the gas and oil." He untied a length of rope from the handle, wrapped it around a cylinder on top of the motor, and yanked. The motor roared to life, the spinning blade sprayed grit.

"Watch for stones, they'll chip the blade. You'll be responsible for damage." He walked away.

I pushed the mower to the front of the house. He hadn't told me the direction in which I was supposed to mow—up and down the hill, the long way, or from side to side. My decision. My father was very fussy about my cutting in long rows. He hated it when I made designs or cut in squares, which he said wasted energy. I decided to cut from side to side, it made more sense than pushing the heavy mower all the way up the hill from the county road, then running down the hill after it.

Cutting the first few rows was uncomfortable until I got my fingers just right around the rubber handlebar grips and figured out the best distance between me and the mower. If I was too close my belly banged against the handlebars, which hurt, and I couldn't use my shoulders to push. If I was too far away I'd have to bend so far forward with my arms outstretched that my back ached.

And then I got the right grip and the right position, and it was easy. What a job! A piece of cake! Ho, boy, I can do this in my sleep, like the Marinos knocking off laps. If I could swim the way I cut lawns, I thought, I'd be the city champ, too. This lawn will win prizes. Just back and forth, nice and easy, follow the lines of the last cut, straight as an arrow, watch for stones. You old devil lawn, you don't have a chance against me and my green machine. I'm gonna cut you down to size, lawn.

Power surged out of my chest and shoulders, through my arms, out my fingers into the green machine. Scraps of grass flew out from under the mower. My nostrils twitched with the beautiful stinging smell of fresh-cut grass. I felt like singing. So I made up a song, and sang it.

*Listen to the birds,
The eagles and the larks,
Saying good-bye, grass,
Here comes Big Bob Marks.*

I felt terrific. What a great summer this is going to be. I've reached a decision, I've got a plan. I don't worry about me hanging around all summer feeling sorry for myself. I've got a job. I got it all by myself, nobody helped me. Well, almost all by myself. Wait till they find out about it. They'll be proud. And they should be. Nobody ever cut a lawn like I'm cutting this lawn. By the time I'm finished with this lawn it'll look like a wall-to-wall carpet. Smoooooth.

I've got a job. My own money. Seventy-five cents an hour, six hours a day, that's four dollars and fifty cents. Five days. That's twenty-two dollars and fifty cents a week. My own money. I'm rich. I won't tell anybody for a while. One day I'll go into town, buy some earrings for Mom, a belt for Dad. I might even get Michelle some perfume. I'll write a note with that: For a sister who smells. When they ask me where I got the money, I'll tell them I robbed a bank. A man has to do something with his life. I don't find that amusing, Robert. Now, Bobby, we really appreciate these presents, but...

And then I'll tell them. That'll get a smile out of my father. He'll be proud of me.

I'll get Joanie a book of poems. Emily Dickinson. She loves Emily Dickinson. I can't wait to tell her about my job. She'll have a lot to say about it.

Ouch. A small stone shot out from under the mower and bounced off my ankle. Watch those stones. I was just about to stop and rub my ankle, it really hurt, when I noticed that Dr. Kahn was watching me from the porch. Wouldn't want him to know I ran over a stone.

The sun was prickling the little hairs on the back of my neck. I could use one of those big white cavalry hats John Wayne wears in the movies. Captain Marks of the U.S. Cavalry, the only man who understands the Apaches. He grew up with them after his parents were killed in a wagon-train massacre. A renegade band has broken loose from the reservation, led by Chief Willie Ratface. They're on the warpath, raiding settlements; nobody's safe. And the colonel's daughter is coming in on the next stagecoach to visit our desolate desert outpost. Captain Marks and his rough-and-tumble troopers, the dregs of the cavalry who'll take orders only from him, will ride out and save her.

Once I had a U.S. Cavalry hat. I had a complete U.S. Cavalry uniform with a holster belt that went around your waist and over your shoulder, and a metal cap pistol shaped like a six-shooter. M

grandparents sent it to me for my birthday. The pants were blue with a yellow stripe down the leg. The jacket was blue, too, and had captain's bars on the shoulders, and ribbons and shiny gold buttons. It was beautiful. But it didn't fit. Not even the hat.

I couldn't button the jacket or zipper the pants or even get the belt around my waist. I never even got to play with the gun because my mother wanted to keep the set new so she could exchange the uniform for a larger size. But it was the largest size they made. I guess I was around eight or nine years old then. My father wanted me to keep it, he said it would give me an incentive to lose weight. I couldn't fit into it. I wished they had given it away. Just looking at that uniform in its box made me feel so bad I ate more. One day when I was alone in the house I opened a box of Hydrox cookies and jammed them into my mouth, fast as I could, not caring about the brown crumbs spilling out of the corners of my mouth; just jammed in those cookies faster than I could chew them, swallowing lumps of cookies big as Ping-Pong balls that got stuck in my throat and chest until I choked and had to wash them down with cold milk. They still hurt going down, I felt every Hydrox Ping-Pong ball push through my throat and chest until it fell with a thump into my stomach. And still I couldn't stop until I'd finished every cookie in the box, and then I had to lie down. My stomach had turned to concrete and couldn't move for hours until it was digested.

I felt hungry. I looked at my watch. 9:42 A.M. That's all it was. I'd been cutting only a little more than a half hour. How could time move so slowly? The world must have a low Basal Metabolism today.

Keep cutting. Can't stop. He's watching me from the porch. My mouth got dry and my nose was filled with fumes from the gasoline engine, and every time I turned to start a new row, pain exploded in my wrists and shot up my arms into my shoulders. My fingers were numb, I'd never be able to pull them off the handlebar grips. My back hurt. My head hurt. My feet were very hot. I was sweating all over, even my knees and elbows were sweating. Each scorching drop of sweat rolled slowly down my chest and back like a scorching drop of acid burning out a furrow in my skin. If only I could take off my shirt like everybody else who cuts grass. But my pants weren't buttoned, and, anyway, I never take off my shirt when people are watching.

Everything was getting hazy. Trees swayed and there wasn't even a breeze. The lawn began to wobble. It rippled. Everything was wavy; it was like looking at the world through a fish tank. The lawn began to roll like the ocean. I was getting lawn sick.

And then the motor stopped. Just stopped dead. I hadn't realized how loud the mower was, how its roar banged against my ears and clogged my brain, until it was suddenly silent and I heard birds tweet again and crickets chirp and the whoosh of traffic on the county road. Far away, a dog barked.

Why did it stop? Did I break it? The sweat turned cold on my skin. I have to start it again. The rope was still on the handlebars. I tried to remember how Dr. Kahn had started the engine. Wind the rope around the cylinder, and pull. I had trouble opening my hands, they were locked into hooks around the grips.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dr. Kahn step off the porch and start down the lawn toward me. My hands slowly opened. They were red and swollen. I wrapped the rope around the cylinder, and pulled. The motor whined, and died. I tried again. This time, nothing.

I heard his slippers slapping against his heels. I pulled with all my might, lost my balance, and tripped over the mower. I could have just stayed there, sprawled out on the lawn, my face in the sweet grass. But he was coming and I jumped up.

"You're out of gas," he said. The shotgun eyes blasted right through me. He unscrewed a little cap on the side of the motor and stuck his finger in the gas tank. It came out dry. "A gas mower runs

on gas. Did you know that?"

"Yek."

"The gas is in the shed. And don't forget the funnel."

The hill seemed steeper now, it was like climbing a mountain. A very steep, short mountain. I was much closer to the porch than I thought. I hadn't cut all that much grass.

I felt better in the shed, soothed by the coolness and the darkness. I found a gallon can of gasoline and a funnel. Outside again, the heat slammed into me like a wall of hot wet cotton. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I could hardly breathe.

"Is this job too tough for you?" Dr. Kahn had followed me up.

"Nnnnnnn..." It was the best my stuck tongue could do.

"What was that?"

"Wa'er. Nee' a glath wa'er."

"There's a spigot on the side of the house. You're not to go inside."

I stumbled toward it. A water hole in the desert. Or a mirage. Until I touched the rusty handle, I was sure it would disappear. The water wasn't cold and it tasted like metal, but I drank it out of my hands until I thought my belly would burst.

I staggered back down the hill, burping. Even with the funnel, I spilled some gas on the lawn. It took four hard yanks, but the green machine roared back to life.

Cut on, and on. And on. Back and forth, side to side, watch for stones, keep a neat row.

I wanted to stop. Just leave the machine and go home. Nobody at home knew I had a job so nobody would know I quit. This is torture. Who needs it? I'm walking on burning needles. My blisters have blisters. Hammers banging on my shoulders. Electric jolts in my wrists. I can feel every inch of me, and every inch of me hurts. Just stop and walk away.

A long black car swept down the driveway, stopped and honked. Dr. Kahn stuck his head out the window, yelled something at me, then drove down to the county road and out of sight.

I could leave now.

You've got to do it, Captain Marks. You're the only one who can make it through the renegade desert to Fort Desolation and bring back the Regiment. We're counting on you.

And then suddenly I didn't hurt anymore, and I couldn't have stopped if I wanted to. All I could do was go back and forth, back and forth, and sometimes I ran into the bushes along the side of the lawn, the sharp thorns snagging on my sleeves and whipping at my chest and scratching the back of my hands until blood bubbled up in the thin red lines, and twice I stepped into holes and fell down and stones clattered against the whirling blade and bounced off my legs, and when the mower ran out of gas again I filled it and yanked it back to life and pushed on, and on, and I stumbled along like I was drunk.

"You call this mowing a lawn?"

I was halfway between the porch and the county road. I had cut half the front lawn, what was I talking about? I followed his long, quivering finger up the hill. The lawn was a mess. I had missed hundreds of tufts of grass. Most of the rows were squiggly light green snakes lying among dark green patches of uncut grass. The work of a crazy drunken lawn mower.

"I call this a disgrace." He lifted the mower and examined the blade.

"You must have gone out of your way to find every stone on the lawn. Look at the chips on the blade. I'll have to get another one. Cost at least four fifty." He shook his head. "That'll be subtracted from your wages, of course."

He looked at his watch. "Well, it's after three o'clock. Tomorrow you'll do it all over again."

What did you say?"

~~I hadn't said a word. I turned away so he couldn't see me cry, and I stumbled down to the country road.~~

I don't remember walking around the lake. Car horns kept warning me off the road back to the sand shoulder. The road shimmered and heaved in the heat. Twice I stopped to throw up, but nothing came out. I saw the sign, Marino's Beach Club and Snack Bar, and staggered right up to the serving counter.

"Wa'er? Pleath?"

Connie said, "You got to be kidding. You want water, go jump in the lake."

"Hey, wait a minute." A big bronze chest with a St. Christopher medal hanging between huge muscles loomed up. "You Michelle's brother?"

"Yek."

"Connie, get him some water." Big hard arms grabbed me around the chest and dragged me to a picnic table under the shade of a beach umbrella. "Your sister's been looking for you, she drove past here twice. Connie!"

"I only got two hands, Peter."

"Since when? C'mon, this boy needs water."

"M'okay," I said.

"You'll be all right, just a little heatstroke. You've been running or something? Heavy fella like you shouldn't run in this weather." He held a cup to my mouth while I drank. "What happened to your hands? Cat scratch you up?"

"Yeah."

"Come with me." He helped me around the back of the snack bar shack to a small room. "Here you go." He lowered me on a cot and opened a first-aid cabinet.

Connie came in with more water and some big white pills. "Salt tablets," she said. "Make you feel better."

"Thanks."

Pete poured alcohol on the back of my hands.

"It stings."

"A man can take it. So you're the famous kid brother. Just lie down now. That's it. You know who I am?"

"Pete Marino."

"The one and only." He grinned. "So. What really happened to you? The Rummies work you over?"

"No...I...I was running. I fell down."

"Hey, you can tell Peter the Great. Look, it happens to every summer kid at least once. Even happened to me."

"What happened?"

"About four, five years ago. I was your age. They caught me alone on the other side of the lake and gave me a pounding. Must have been eight of them, the whole Rumson gang. I went back with my brother Vinnie and a couple of his friends and we cleaned 'em out. They haven't bothered a Marino

since.”

“Why do they beat up summer kids?”

“Who knows? They’re crazy.” He whirled his finger near his head. “The whole lake, all this land around here, used to belong to the Rumson family, but they’re so dumb they lost it. Hey, listen, better get you home.”

“I can make it.”

“It’s a long walk.”

“You know where I live?”

“Are you kidding? C’mon.” He helped me up and led me outside. He was holding me up more than he had to. People playing in the water and lying on the beach turned to look at me. I felt foolish. “Connie! I’ll be right back, I’m going to drive Bobby Marks home.”

“We got people waiting to rent boats.”

“You got two hands. You told me so yourself.” He opened the door of a white pickup truck. I had seen it before, it was famous around the lake. The doors and roof and bed of the truck were covered with red lightning bolts on which was lettered, in blue script, THE MARINO EXPRESS. He had to boost me up into the cab I was so tired and sore.

He jerked the truck out of the gravel parking lot onto the county road, but once he was on the road he drove slowly, like he was leading a ticker-tape parade. All along the lake, girls and boys, kids and old people, waved and yelled his name. A lot of people noticed me in the truck. I felt good about that.

He turned up our hill, and I said, “You can let me off anywhere,” but he just grinned and said “Door-to-door service.” Michelle was just getting out of our Dodge when we pulled into the driveway. Pete jumped out almost before he stopped.

“Marks residence?”

“Pete! What are you doing here?” Michelle looked happy and scared at the same time.

“Special delivery.” Pete danced around the truck. He was barefoot. He opened the door and hauled me out, and even though I could walk he made a big show of half-carrying me to the lawn. “Think you can make it the rest of the way, big fella?”

“Where’d you find him?” asked Michelle.

My mother came out of the house then, her eyes wide, and she started toward me with her arms out. I didn’t want a big scene in front of Pete, so I used my last ounce of energy to run past her and go inside. Through the window, I saw Mom glance at Michelle and Pete, who were standing very close together talking. Then she came inside.

“Are you all right?”

“M’okay.” I felt like all the blood and water had run out of my body. My bones had turned to rubber. I was hot and cold at the same time.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Where were you?”

“Around the lake. I was running and I fell down.”

“You were running? From whom?”

“Just running. I’m going to take a nap.”

“Do you want something to eat or drink?”

“No.”

“Oh, Bobby, you must be sick.” She followed me into my bedroom. I fell on my bed. She was

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