

Camp
by Jeremy C. Shipp

My muscles tighten. My teeth clench. My irritable bowel is seriously pissed off.

I'm no good at sitting.

"Hold it together," my dad tells me. Not physically here, of course, but why would that stop him? Hold it together—that's easy for him to say. He's made of steel bars and rivets and bolts. Me, I'm held together with Elmer's glue and pushpins and chewing gum.

Memories vibrate. They fall and crack open.

A few years ago I shit my pants on this very same two and a half hour bus ride. With liquid crap trickling down my legs, I stumbled toward the bus driver. In tears. In shame.

I begged him to take me home, but he said, "Sit down!"

I told him that I was sick, and he laughed at me and said, "No kidding," but I won't shit my pants this time. Even if I do, I'll handle it. I'm bigger and stronger and smarter than I used to be. My dad made sure of that.

Another memory falls off the shelf and smashes on the floor. My first memory.

In this one, I watch my neighbor's pet rabbit kick frantically inside a blender until its legs are too mangled to even tremble anymore.

"This game sucks," Nigel says, beside me, tapping at his phone/camera/mp3 player/game console/everything else.

"Can I play for a while?" I say.

"It doesn't suck that much."

I've never seen or spoken with Nigel outside of camp and the bus ride to and from, but I still consider him one of my best friends. Mainly because I don't have all that many.

Nigel's a troublemaker and sort of a jerk, and that's why I like him.

"You know, they're going to confiscate that," I say.

"Not unless I keep it in my ass," he says. "They won't check my ass. Not without probable cause, anyway."

"That's sick. Would you really do that?"

"You'd have to help me."

"You're sick."

"No kidding."

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Once again I'm stuck in the top bunk, despite the fact that I called bottom the moment Nigel and I entered the cabin. I remind him that last year I fell off the top bunk during a night terror and suffered a mild concussion. I also remind him that he promised me on the life of Katherine the Great, his pet Chihuahua, that this year I could have the bottom.

"She died two months ago," he says. That's that.

Hamilton enters the cabin, dressed in yellow and grinning like an idiot as usual. "Hello, boys. Excited about the fire tonight?"

"Yeah," we say, Nigel and I.

"Good."

I shudder.

I don't hate the guy, but sometimes when he's talking I want to punch him in the kidneys.

"Your cell phone, please, Nigel," Hamilton says, his hand out and flat like a bear-trap ready to bite. Although mousetrap might be more appropriate. This is Hamilton, after all.

Nigel mumbles something that sounds like, "Poop hound," and hands over the phone.

"I'm not trying to be a dark cloud at a picnic," Hamilton says. "I just want to start our camping experience out right. We're not only here for fun and games. We're also trying to learn some responsibility. And that means following the rules." He sits on the bed and wraps his arm around Nigel's shoulders. "You might not appreciate it now, but someday you will. You won't always have counselors or parents to bring you what you want. Someday you're going to have to fulfill your own needs, and that's not always an easy thing to do. It's better to start preparing now. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Nigel says. "Please get your hands off me."

Hamilton sighs and heads for the door. "See you at the fire, boys." He smiles and leaves.

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For those campers who don't like eating sheep meat, the counselors have a supply of BBQ ribs. I watch the sheep spinning on the spit. It reminds me of my neighbor's bunny, turning around and around, staring so intently at nothing.

"Does anyone else have a ghost story?" says Kent, another counselor.

Nigel raises his hand.

"Go ahead, Nigel."

Nigel stands, though no one else did when they were telling stories. “Years ago, there was a boy murdered at this camp,” he says.

A few kids laugh.

“He was a good boy,” Nigel says. “He never did any wrong to anybody, so he went to Heaven. The first thing he wanted to do when he got there was meet God. He had all sorts of questions for God about the meaning of life and stuff like that. Mostly, he just wanted to thank God for creating the world. The problem was that a lot of people wanted to meet God, so the line was really, really long. So the boy waited. For years and years. He had a long time to think about what happened to him. He was killed before he ever had the chance to drive a car or fuck a girl or—”

“Nigel, don’t be vulgar,” Hamilton says, smiling.

“Sorry,” Nigel says. “Anyway, the more he thought about it, the angrier he got. By the time he reached the front of the line, his whole body was covered with fire. He didn’t care about the meaning of life and he didn’t feel like thanking God for anything. All he cared about was getting revenge. God loved the boy and so he sent him back here, to this camp, like the boy wanted. The reason why I know this is because he talked to me last night in my dreams. He told me to warn all of you to beg for forgiveness. He’s not only after the one who killed him, but everyone who didn’t stop this terrible thing from happening. Everyone.”

There’s some laughter, but mostly there isn’t.

“He’s telling the truth,” Mike says. She’s one of the few girls who comes to Arthur’s Science Camp every year. “I saw the boy last night too,” she says. “He asked me to fuck him, but I’m not a whore.”

“You can’t fuck a ghost,” England says, in that stupid fake accent of his.

“Does anyone else have a story?” Hamilton says.

“He’s watching us right now,” Nigel says. “If you don’t apologize, he’s going to—”

“Your turn is over, Nigel,” Kent says. “Please sit down.”

Nigel obeys.

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The boy holds hands with the Holy Light and points at me. The Light glares at me in a way that reminds me of my father.

“It wasn’t me,” I say. “I didn’t do it.”

The Light comes at me with a belt.

I wake up when I hit the floor.

Luckily, I don’t hit my head this time.

A boy rushes into the cabin and I kick at him, even though he’s several feet away from me.

“Wake up. You have to see this,” says the boy, not a ghost, but England. He tugs at the stupid fake necklace of teeth he wears all the time. He always plays with that thing when he’s excited.

“What’s going on?” Nigel says.

“Come on,” England says. “Before they take it away.”

So we follow him outside, past the other cabins, toward the barn. Already, there’s a small group of kids standing around the outside of the barn.

We enter the circle and see the body.

“Shit,” Nigel says. “Is it anyone we know?”

“No, it’s just some guy,” a younger kid says. I don’t know his name. He’s new.

Tiny spotlights stroke the man’s carcass up and down. A flashlight rests for a while pointed at the man’s face, and I notice that someone’s crapped in his gaping mouth.

“Maybe the ghost did it,” England says. “What’s his name, Nigel?”

“He forgot his name,” Nigel says. “He’s too consumed with rage to remember.”

Hamilton squeezes through the child barrier, wearing urine-colored pajamas covered with smirking bees. Kent and his nightgown’s close behind.

“Go back to bed, children,” Hamilton says.

No one moves.

“Does anyone know this man?” Kent says, kneeling, searching through pockets.

“He thinks I’m a slut,” Mike says.

“No I don’t,” Kent says.

“Not you, Kent. The dead man.”

“Oh.”

“Go back to bed, children,” Hamilton says. “Or none of us will be allowed in the barn tomorrow.”

Most everyone groans.

“Now,” Hamilton says.

We go back to bed.

I’m usually no good at falling asleep, but the instant I hit the mattress, I sleep like a rotting baby.

One swipe of Hamilton's keycard and the barn door will open, and we can all do what we're here for.

But Hamilton doesn't swipe the keycard. He stands there, staring at us, smiling.

"As I'm sure you all already know, a certain troubling incident took place last night, and we need to talk about it," Hamilton says. "Kent and I haven't been able to ascertain the identity of the man, but we believe he was homeless and living in the woods."

"Then he wasn't homeless," Nigel says. "If he was living in the woods, then the woods was his home."

Hamilton's smile grows a little—which doesn't mean that he's any happier, by the way. "OK, Nigel," Hamilton says. "The point is that we're probably not going to cancel camp because of what happened, but that doesn't mean we can just forget about it."

Cold wads of water begin to pelt me from above.

"Can we talk about this inside?" England says.

"No one's going into the barn until we finish this conversation," Kent says.

"He was just some homeless guy," England says. "It's not like he was one of us. Who cares?"

"We should all care," Hamilton says. "Your parents sent you here because they want you to care."

"I'm too fucking cold and wet to care," England says.

"You'd better start," Kent says. "Or you're not going to last very long."

"OK," England says. "Sorry."

Sometimes the other kids put England and Nigel in the same category, but England really isn't much of a rebel. He only talks back because he likes the attention. 99.9% of the time, he doesn't mean what he says.

"The rules and regulations that we follow here don't exist to make our lives more difficult," Hamilton says. "They're here to protect us. To help shape us into very fine young people."

"Not into prostitutes," Mike says.

"That's true," Hamilton says. "But what we're discussing right now is the deceased homeless man."

The dead man floats around like a ghost inside my mind, so I close my eyes to get a better look. I see him so clearly, it startles me. He looks a little like my father.

Hamilton continues, "For safety reasons, we're only allowed to slaughter sheep inside the barn. We all know that. However, breaking that rule isn't what has Kent and me so concerned. We at Arthur's Science Camp believe that to slaughter an adult not only shows disrespect to us, but to the other authority figures in your lives. I'm talking about your parents. Do you want to disrespect your parents?"

There are a few no's. Most everyone's silent.

"Slaughtering a fully-grown sheep is a privilege at your age," Hamilton says. "Not a right. Only your parent mentor can decide whether or not you've earned that privilege. Not me, not Kent, not any of you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," we say.

He swipes the card.

Nigel leans in close to me and says, "Let's go swimming."

“We can’t,” I say. “We have to go inside now.”

“Suit yourself.” He walks away.

So I go in alone, with everyone else.

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The young sheep girl squirms and gags, and that’s about all she can manage. At some point she’ll probably pee her jeans.

My station today is equipped with needles and an axe. Mainly I’ll be working with the needles, because the axe is just to finish.

I have thirty minutes before Kent shows up to inspect my work, and my stomach is killing me. I feel like throwing up and shitting at the same time. I feel like exploding.

I start off scratching her skin with a needle tip. In general the skin nearer to the bone is more sensitive than areas with more fatty tissue, so I go for the skin nearer to the bone.

She’s trying to talk to me. If she weren’t gagged, she’d probably beg for mercy and then when I don’t give her any, she’d tell me that she hates me. She’d tell me that I’m going to burn in hell.

I stick a needle in her eye.

She screams silently.

What she doesn’t understand is that I’m not doing this because I want to. I don’t want to cause her as much pain as humanly possible. This is about need.

I’m going to do a great job, and then I’m going to get my needle badge, and then I’m going to show it to my father. He’s going to hold me and tell me that he’s proud of me.

I need this badge.

*

Once again I dream of falling, and I wake up on the floor.

“Come on, guys,” England says, without his usual fake accent. “Hurry up.”

“Who died this time?” Nigel says.

England doesn't answer.

We follow him to the fire pit.

Hamilton isn't smiling anymore.

I throw up on England. He doesn't care.

Hamilton dangles there, naked, skewered by the sheep spit. But he's not a sheep. He's one of us.

Mike wraps a leaf around Hamilton's small penis, and holds it on with one of her hair bands. “That's better.”

“Go to your rooms!” Kent says, rushing in front of Hamilton. He waves at us with a machete. “Go to your rooms now!”

That's what we do.

I sit down next to Nigel on the bottom bunk. My muscles loosen. My teeth relax. My stomach doesn't say a word.

“I can't believe he's gone,” I say. “He was annoying, but he didn't deserve this.”

“The others we cooked on that fire didn't deserve it either,” Nigel says. “No one deserves it.”

“That’s different though,” I say. “They’re only sheep. Hamilton was a wolf like us.”

“So we have the right to torture and kill anyone who isn’t like us?”

“Not the right, really. It’s just the way things are. The world is really overpopulated, and we’re a natural defense mechanism.”

“Is that what your dad tells you?”

“Well . . . yeah, but I believe it.” My gut’s starting to churn again.

“My dad says that every person we kill did something really terrible in a past life. He calls us knights of karmic justice. Everyone’s got their reasons, but reasons aren’t good enough.”

I’m silent for a few moments, as a little spotlight shines inside my brain. “Nigel . . . did you—”

“Did I kill Hamilton?” He shakes his head. “I haven’t killed anyone since I got here, and I’m not planning to.”

All I can think to say is, “You’re going to get in trouble.”

So I do.

*

Kent dragged me across the camp by the arm, and that’s why I’m wet and muddy. He also told me, “Hamilton was like a brother to me. He helped me kill my parents. Do you know what kind of bond that sort of thing creates?” That’s why I pissed and shit my pajama pants.

He’s standing over me with a bloody machete, breathing hard. I notice his trophies on the nearby shelf. Scalps and dried ears mostly.

“Did you do it?” Kent says.

I shake my head.

He kneels on top of my legs and presses the blade against my forehead. “Mike says she saw you sneaking outside her cabin, heading right towards Hamilton’s place.”

“That’s not true,” I say, shitting my pants even more. “Mike’s a liar. Everyone knows that.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I haven’t sliced your fucking neck open already.” He stands.

“Then again, she might be telling the truth this time. How do I know?”

“I didn’t do it,” I say.

“Not just anyone could take out Hamilton. He was a monster. But you. You’re better than most of the others here. You could have done it.”

I can’t help but smile.

He stares down at me and shakes his head. “Go back to your room. I need to think.”

On my way out I hear muffled cries coming from his closet. Probably two children, a boy and a girl. I know how Kent thinks.

*

There’s no denying it. That’s Hamilton’s keycard in Nigel’s hand.

“You killed him,” I say.

“I’m not like that anymore,” Nigel says. “I found this in the mud.”

“You killed Hamilton so you could free those stupid sheep.”

“I am going to free them, but I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Kent’s going to kill me because of you!” I race forward and trip on the mud before I can touch Nigel.

“I didn’t do it,” Nigel says, and heads for the barn.

“Help!” I say, louder than I’ve ever been in my whole life. No one leaves their cabins. Not even England. As far as they know, Kent’s murdering me, and they don’t want any part of that. I don’t blame them.

I do, however, blame Nigel.

So I follow him into the barn.

Nigel’s already in the cage, snipping cable ties with a wire cutter.

“If they hear you crying, they’ll come in and kill us,” Nigel says.

The children only cry harder.

“Fuck,” Nigel says.

I stand there, watching him for a while. He looks so full of himself. So happy. But he’s not the great guy that he thinks he is. He’s going to get everyone killed. All the campers, Kent, our parents. Me.

And for what? A few stupid sheep who’re already too traumatized to be worth anything to society.

I pick up a finishing gun from a nearby table and make sure it’s loaded. It is. I cock it.

“You have to run away as fast as you can,” Nigel says. “Keep running until you can’t run anymore. Then hide. The people who find you will take you to your moms and dads.” Nigel’s looking right at me and the gun as he’s saying all this.

I lift the gun.

Would I really kill one of my best friends?

Well, maybe I'm possessed by the spirit of the ghost kid. Maybe Nigel's the one who killed him years ago and this is his final revenge.

What I know for sure is that I don't want to kill Nigel.

I need to.

Reasons are good enough.

I aim and fire.

I fire again at one of the sheep who's running right at me, or the door, I'm not sure which. I hit him in the neck. I must have hit the carotid artery because he's gushing.

Most of the sheep run away. Some don't.

I walk over to Nigel.

He's saying, "Hello kitty. Hello kitty. Hello kitty," with a bullet hole in his head.

I don't think he's ever even owned a cat.

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My muscles tighten. My teeth clench. I feel like shitting and pissing and throwing up, but there's nothing left inside me.

I'm no good at being strapped down on a cold metal table, waiting for the inevitable.

"We have to get out of here," I say. "Nigel let the sheep go. They'll find help and the cops will come after us."

"No," Kent says. "The sheep won't make it. The camp is located here for a reason."

"I . . . I didn't kill Hamilton. It was Nigel. I had to—"

“No. Mike killed Hamilton. England saw the whole thing. He agreed to tell me who did it if he could slaughter the culprit himself. I agreed. She’s next.”

I wondered who was in the bag he carried in. It must be her.

I picture England sliding his hunting knife across Mike’s stomach and all the campers gasping. England will love it.

Whether or not Mike actually killed Hamilton is anyone’s guess.

This can’t be happening to me.

“If you kill me, my dad will eat you alive,” I say. I want to scream the words, but I’m almost whispering.

“Your dad won’t do shit,” Kent says. “I know him. He cares a lot more about himself than he does about you. If he ate me, every parent mentor of every kid here would be after him. Anyway, your father will expect me to kill you. You broke the most important rule. You killed Nigel.”

“But . . .”

Kent gags me before I can say anything more. It doesn’t really matter. I’d probably just beg for mercy and then when I don’t get any, I’d tell him that I hate him. I’d tell him that he’s going to burn in hell.

Maybe I do tend to kill adults while I’m sleepwalking and dreaming of slaughtering my father. That doesn’t mean I did anything wrong.

Kent blasts me with his nail gun.

Most of the kids gasp. Some laugh. And that hurts more than the nail.

Kent’s not doing this because he wants to. He doesn’t want to cause me as much pain as humanly possible. This is about need.

I'm going to be an example that no one will ever forget.

This is all Nigel's fault.