

The smell in the tent was enough to keep you awake. Socks and campfire smoke and farts that were stronger than sleeping bags. I turned to look at the bastard lying next to me.

“Jesus Baxter,” I said to him while he responded with a short and satisfied Ha!

“It was the meatballs! It’s always the meatballs.” That night, like most of the monthly campouts, the Troop chose Italian cuisine. This was our January campout at a park somewhere upstate and it was freezing. On those nights, I would keep my clothes for the next day down in the bottom of my bag near my feet so they would be warm in the morning. Luckily, the ground we pitched the tent on was clear of snow, but you could stay awake all night watching your breath rise above your mouth in the dark. I was doing this when the smell crept over to my side.

“How much did you eat?” I choked and sat up in my sleeping bag to unzip the tent door.

“Enough to make sure there wasn’t any left, that’s for damn sure,” he said proudly. Baxter and I were older guys in the Troop, so we usually slept together on campouts. I never really thought of him as much of a Boy Scout, but I guess I never thought that highly of any of us. There were about twenty boys in Troop 14 at that campout, and trying to control them all was like lighting a cigarette in the wind, which Baxter was attempting to do.

“Zip the door back up man, the lighter’s blowing out.”

“Hell no.”

“Come on, this will stop the smell.”

“Yeah, and then stink up everything else in here. Take it outside.”

“Do you know how cold it is out there?”

“No, Baxter, why don’t you tell me?”

“For Christ’s sake,” and he pushed me back down from the flap. He lit his cigarette, poked his head out to make sure the adult leaders were snoring in their tents, and stepped out like somebody was making him do it. I don’t think he cared much about losing his title of Assistant Senior Patrol Leader, because he would have if he got caught. But that would have required getting somebody new in that position under me.

A person who would actually care if he had it. I was thinking of the particular guy when Baxter whispered his name to himself outside.

“Dick-loving Daniel.”

I stayed quiet for a moment but couldn't help wonder why Baxter said it loud enough for me to hear, or how he seemed to know who I was thinking about. On most other occasions I would have told him to shut up with that colorful nickname. Daniel was two years younger than us, a high school freshman. He was skinny, pale, and had few friends. He wore his shirts tucked in and had sneakers that were so bulky and white that they boggled the mind.

“Why, what about him?” I asked lying down again inside, watching my cold air billow.

“He's got his light on as usual. Probably jerkin' it to the *Dick Sucker's Review*,” Baxter whispered back through the thin nylon walls.

“Oh, you're letting him borrow one from your subscription?”

“Shut it Slattery. Why don't you go keep him company? You can leave your sleeping bag here.” His animosity was sharper than usual that night. I sat up again and zipped the flap down to get a look. Daniel was the only guy who had a tent to himself. He set it up a few yards away from the others after no one wanted to sleep with him. From my seat behind the flap, you could see a light from inside but no shadow or profile. The tent seemed to glow in the cold air like it was a small house for some alien on Neptune. I sat looking perplexed.

Daniel was annoying as a Scout. He had more fervor than anyone. At meetings when I would form the guys up and we'd say the Oath and Law, you could hear him spouting it off over everybody. He ended the Law with a timpani dominance in each word, “...Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent!” Ask any of the guys to say either adjuration any other time during the week and they wouldn't be able to get past: “A Scout is...” Daniel also had handfuls of more merit badges than I and was even on his way to getting Eagle before me; his older Senior Patrol Leader.

Part of it, I admit, was envy, but when it came to Baxter berating him I was the one who had his back. I stood up for Daniel in my equivocal way and endured the repercussions. Maybe I didn't want to be on Baxter's side of things or see myself as one of those redneck Boy Scouts that kick guys out for not being “morally straight”. I just did it because he was weak, and I wasn't. He was like some small animal you find outside your house. You'll give it food, but it sleeps outside. Anyway, we were all young, and when we weren't beating up on each other or blowing bug spray out of our mouths into the flames of lighters, we were counting shooting stars and laughing at stories about girls. There was

an innocence that slept in those tents. We were boys. Around the fire, farts and swears flew like birds.

"You know I tried calling him 'Dan' today after dinner? I was like, 'Hey Dan! How bout you use those pretty hands of yours and get some wood!' Were you there? Get some wood? Did you get it?" I looked up from inside the tent at Baxter who was inhaling the filter now while smiling and nodding. His acne looked like mud in the dim orange of what was left of his cigarette. I chose not to respond.

"Anyway," he continued, "he pulled me over to a tree and goes like this, 'It's Daniel, not Dan.'"

"That's intriguing. You know, you only think he's gay because he doesn't rip ass like you or lie about getting with girls. You do know that right?"

"Next thing you know he'll be telling me its 'Danielle,'" Baxter said back, looking to see if there was anything else he could drag out from the piece of candy corn that was once a cigarette. Finally, he flicked the butt out and aimed towards the glowing Neptunian home. He somehow had enough strength in his fingers that it hit Daniel's tent from yards away, bounced on its outer wall, and rolled down out of view. The inside went dark.

"Did you see that?" Baxter hissed.

"You asshole."

"His light just went out! *That's* how you know, dammit I knew it. He's hiding something in there. Jesus, I would love to punch open one of those dick-sucking lips. I knew he was...damn it's cold, open the tent." Baxter unzipped the flap and jumped in like he was going through a jungle of rubber bands. I sat back and watched him peer out the cracked-open flap on his knees.

"Will you shut up with that shit? Keep it to yourself, you Nazi."

"Are you calling me a spigot?"

"Jesus Christ." I lowered my head.

"First of all," he began while still spying out at the dark tent, "I ain't a Nazi, in fact, I can tolerate gays just as much as the next guy. But what did you say? You think I know he's gay because he doesn't *rip ass*? Hell no, Slattery, what that little fucker did is inexcusable. It's gross and if he thinks he can get away with it he has no idea."

"What are you talking about?"

"Alright, listen." He turned to face me. His mouth dropped a little and he inhaled like he was summoning powers. "You know how you stayed back and went with the second group when we all went down to the showers tonight?"

"Yeah, why?"

“Well that little dick sucker was in...”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Listen dammit! He was in my group when we went down there. You know how the place only had four showers? I had to wait for everybody...”

“Baxter, we’re lucky there’s an indoor facility. These parks never have that.”

“Shut up! Listen to me. I had to wait right? I was one of the last four to go, you know, with Rat Tail and Sandals. Everybody else finished and walked back up to the site. Well, that *Danny* was the other guy of the four. And I didn’t know it, but I guess he took his shower faster than anybody. He was the first one done. When I got out from mine I didn’t think anybody was still in the room on the benches you know? I didn’t even look up. So I’m standing there drying off, you know my chest and my junk, everything really well so I don’t get cold when we go back outside. Finally, right as I’m pulling up my boxers, I hear him shift around on one of the benches in the room. He’s staring right at me. I couldn’t believe it. Seriously, Slattery, totally staring, like this. And I was about to say something like, ‘Fuck off fag!’ when Rat Tail turns his shower off and starts talking to me. Saying something like how his hair never dries from through the wall. But I just stare right back at him and he looks away like nothing happened. I stare at the little queer like his ass is mine and he knows it. So you know what I did? I decided to wait. I didn’t want Rat Tail or Sandals try to pull me off of him if they came out seeing my foot go through his face. I’m gonna wait till it’s just me and him. Trust me man. He knows what he did was wrong. I can’t have that kind of shit on my mind. For all I know he’s jerking off to me over there...”

As Baxter finished on this self-flattering epiphany, his words got slow like he was catching up to them and turned again to look out our tent and into Daniel’s. The darkness, thankfully, prevented me from seeing the hair on his neck that crept out from his over-stretched shirt and into public view. I felt bad for the sight Daniel would have had to witness if the story was in fact true.

“You really think he was looking at you because he wanted to? Do you actually think he was checking you out?” Then Baxter lunged at me. Like a lucky catch, he grabbed my mouth in his hand with perfect accuracy and pushed me down to the floor. My head jutted into the tent wall with wide eyes and I smelled the cigarette on his fingers.

“Listen to me, Slattery. Do not say that shit. You cannot say those words. Only I can say those words. I know what happened, alright? I don’t need you telling me what I know.” I struggled beneath him but he was stronger than me. When trying to sit back up and push him off

me he pushed back down harder. He had never tried this with me before. "Now listen, alright? I told you this because you're coming with me. Danny-boy is alone now and you're going to come with me because that fucker," he said with spit, "is going to get what he deserves. You have to stand watch."

"Fuck you," I said still struggling. It came out muffled and louder than his whispering so he told me to hush.

"Listen. If you don't come out with me, the leaders are going to find that cigarette butt out there tomorrow and ask who violated a Troop rule. What are they gonna think when I tell them that I saw the Senior Patrol Leader rolling up his sleeping bag and a pack of Camel Lights fell out? I know you keep your shit down there." He moved his mouth over to my chin after I stopped fighting against him.

"They won't believe that," I said back at him with rage, "They won't trust you when I deny it."

"Maybe they will, and maybe they won't. I'll argue until we're both kicked out of the Senior Patrol if I have to. I don't care. But if you think I'm not going to go over to that tent and punch his kidneys until he pisses blood and threaten his life if he ever tells any one, then you're dead wrong. You can stay right here and listen to him cry through the pillow I'll shove down his throat."

"I am not going to let you fuck him up." I never stood up like that for anyone. I felt sure of myself but not my strength. I would run to a leader and look like a pussy if I had to. I was on the edge of screaming out right then.

"Jesus Christ, alright. Listen to me," he said as he still had me pinned. A rock was bruising my spine through the floor of the tent. Baxter's face quieted in demeanor and he continued, "I won't fuck him up. Are you listening? I'm just going to go talk to him. Alright?"

"You're lying."

"I won't. Listen, you don't know what it's like to have somebody look at you naked like that. I'm just going to talk to him about it. You stay outside and make sure nobody wakes up or comes out of their tents. If you hear me wailing on the kid then you can start yelling bloody murder and get every Boy Scout leader in the state to come running to the rescue. All right? I'm not gonna hit him! I was just kidding around. I have to get this thing straightened out in my head."

"If you touch him I'll make sure you severely regret it."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Come on. I wonder if that cigarette's still burning."

I let Baxter out of the tent first as I threw my boots on unlaced. I crawled out as quiet as I could and looked and listened. The moon was

almost full and not as high as it could be. It had to be after midnight and breathing the cold January air was like a knife going down. I wanted it back up in my hand so I could stab Baxter from behind and end this, wake up in my sleeping bag, warm. I could hear one of the leaders snoring a few tents over and it became all I could hear. I didn't realize Baxter was whispering to me until he turned around in his crouched stance.

"Hey!" he whispered hard, "are you listening to me? If he's asleep and he screams or something, just run back to the tent. We'll say it was a joke, alright?"

"Baxter, why do you even want me here with you if you're only going to talk to him?" I asked rubbing my cold hands.

"I'm not going to go back in that tent having you think I did more than I plan on doing. Do you understand? I'm not going to have you tell anyone about this because you're going to know exactly what's going to happen. Besides, you don't trust me anyway. You would've come on your own."

We kept walking and came to Daniel's tent. I thought about him in there, sleeping in his bag. All one hundred pounds of him, with his short blonde hair still parted and untouched. I remembered the first campout he came on. The way he didn't talk to anyone and how the guys were instantly drawn to it. "Did you see how tight his khakis are?" "His mother probably dressed him." "His boyfriend probably dressed him." "Shit, yeah he did." "I remember him from school last year. They all said he was gay." "Great, a fag in the Troop." "I'm not sharing a tent with him." I started shaking, from the cold and for him. I was telling myself that I would give Baxter five minutes. If he were in there longer I would drag him out or call for help. I'm here for you Daniel, I kept thinking.

"Holy shit, look, it's still lit," Baxter said to me when he picked up the butt in his hand. He put it out with his fingers and threw it back down.

"Baxter, I'm giving you five minutes." He looked at me, then shrugged.

"Fine. That should be enough. Just enough time to get it out of him." He moved closer to the tent and kneeled next to its side. I know from experience that when someone does this, even if there's moonlight, you can see a shadowy profile on the wall of the person. It's like a bad effect from a ghost movie when all you can see is black cartoons of people without feet getting taller and skinnier on a wall.

"Shh." Baxter looked up to me from his position. "I can hear him breathing. He's awake." The sound of the zipper coming down on Daniel's tent was long and clean as Baxter executed with surgical precision. I stood behind him, kept my head moving from tent to tent, and thought, Let's get this over with, as Baxter pushed his head in.

"Daniel?" he asked in a whisper.

To this day I remember thinking that if sounds were physical, then the voice that came out of that tent would have looked like a cat up in a tree or a duck covered in oil. But it was human.

"Yeah?" asked Daniel.

"Leave the light off."

The zipper went back up and from then on the two talked inaudibly. Every now and then I would hear Baxter use words like, "see," "like," and "teach." My heart kept beat like a jazz drummer and I would jump upon hearing something snap. Something move. Somebody turn over. What the hell is going on in there? What the hell was I doing? This...I'm not...Who am...

"Because you liked seeing me naked didn't you? You disgusting shit. Are you listening to me?" Baxter's voice shattered the silence of the campsite as if he slid it off a table and onto the floor.

"Baxter! Shut the hell up!" I tried whispering back.

"Tell me Daniel! Tell me you were looking at me!" The unmistakable sound of a slap to the face sent me into a panic. I started fumbling in the dark for the zipper. I pushed and clawed at the nylon door.

"Baxter, you fuck! Don't touch him!" I had stopped whispering. I looked around and saw a tent light turn on. Then another.

"Knock it off out there," the ignorant voice of a leader boomed. Then Daniel cried out and I heard his body meet Baxter's fist. He sounded hollow. I heard it again.

"Tell me you fucking faggot! Tell me you were looking at me! Scream it out so we all can hear! Say it you bitch! Tell me you're my bitch!"

"I'm your bitch!" Daniel shrieked. Fist met flesh. I found the zipper.

"Say it again! Tell me you're a faggot!"

"I'm a faggot!" The flap ripped open as I zipped it down and saw Baxter on top, the shadow of his fists.

"Say it again!" Baxter cried out one last time as I wrapped my arm around his neck and pulled back. Leaders came running to help. I fell back with Baxter landing on top of me and the wind was knocked out of me. From inside, out of the broken body of a boy, Troop 14 heard a part of Daniel rise through the roof of that tent and go into each one of us.

"I am a faggot."

Leaders wrestled Baxter off and away from me when I heard Daniel weeping from the doorway. I sat up and saw him on his back with his thin arms out and bent at the elbow, reaching for something. He was gasping for air. In shock, I closed my eyes and covered my face. Tears started flowing with an ease I had never known. Scouts were gathering around me then, and we stood there looking in.