

Fiction Workshop III

Fall 2015

Final Portfolio

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Preface

(Author's Introduction)

In this portfolio, I've included all four stories that I wrote over the course of the semester. Two of them have been revised specifically for this assignment, the other two are in their original form submitted to the workshop.

My intent with this portfolio is to showcase both what the semester in general looked like for me in writing various stories, as well as to push a couple of those stories further, and improve them to the best of my ability.

Neither story is of course done, and I will discuss each briefly here. The first one I revised was *Just a Good Scout*. I ended up simply revising it as a short-short fiction piece. This was perhaps one of the pieces I was least certain about, just because I had written in third person, and my comfort zone is with the first person point of view. In the revision, I decided to address the concerns I had received about being unclear what Scouting means to Noah, the main character. This is one area where having addressed it, I feel like the motivations and the struggles going on inside of Noah are clearer, but have yet to be worked out on being more smoothly integrated within the story, rather than having distinct moments that identify these internal struggles. I also tried to make the setting clearer, though am unsure if I succeeded in that endeavor. Ultimately I changed the decision that Noah receives from the Board of Review so that he could have more agency in decided for himself what the meaning behind his decisions were going to be, in the hopes that it might make the ending a bit more poignant.

The second story I revised was *Sleeping with the Answer*, retitled to *Break the Rules with Me, Please*. Here the main concern I addressed was how the reader should feel about Chris. I tried to make the situation and Chris' reaction and thought process more realistic, as well as

Mike's reaction to the news. I did bring back the uncertainty in whether or not Chris and Peter actually have sex. I like the ambiguity with hints pointing to perhaps they didn't quite go all the way, but that's up to the reader to give him the benefit of the doubt. I'm not quite sure it works entirely in this draft of it yet. I also wanted to change the stakes of the story, by declaring that Chris already has the leadership position. In this draft, Chris' conflict is driven more by the need for sex. I don't think, at least in this draft, that the problem is quite strong enough to stand on its own. While the character interactions I think are improved in this story, I worry that by removing the stakes of staying in scouts or not, perhaps the big picture conflict of the story is lost a little bit. By the end, I want the reader to be disagreeing with Chris, to think what he is saying is not good, but I also want them to understand how he is being swayed by temptation, and how that can lead to bad decisions even by sensible people. In that attempt, I think this draft is successful.

The last thing I want to comment on is the order of stories in this portfolio. I approached it as if I were compiling a manuscript of short stories, and how would I want to order them. It opens with the story taking place in high school, *The Boy Scouts are for Fags*, and showing how the world is ostracized from the rest of the high school experience. From there, I put *Break the Rules with Me, Please*, thinking that it portrays how the lines of right and wrong aren't always clear and conflict and ostracizing behaviors can happen within the Boy Scouts as well. The conflict and stakes build with *Are You Grinning at Me?* in that there has been a very clear violation of conduct by a Scout, and consequences follow from that. Finally, the portfolio concludes with the revision of *Just a Good Scout*, and it ends on a very quiet note, the character settling on the order of his priorities and making a decision he is proud of, before stepping out into the cold, still night, leaving his work and his effort behind.

Stories and Revisions

The Boy Scouts are for Fags

There's this guy in our Troop, Nathan, who drives me absolutely fucking insane. I mean, can you say sissy? I mean, everything from the way he walks, to the way he gestures his hands annoys the hell out of me. What irritates me the most, however, is his voice. It's so high-pitched and weak, just like the way he flops his wrists. Whenever I have to listen to him talk, it's like the whine of a gnat in your ear that just never goes away.

There are moments where I feel kinda bad for him though. Often times as we're heading to sleep, and of course no one wants to tent with him. No one wants to sleep next to the faggot. And watching him walk on his own off to the side of the campsite always tugs something in me, but then Cameron and my other buddies all laugh it off, and I forget about it.

Weekly meetings aren't as bad, though we still treat him rough. But God Damn It! Can't he just walk like a man and talk like a man? I mean, couldn't he at least try to not be so whiny and flop his hands around so much?

This evening I'm feeling particularly aggressive. I just got out of soccer practice – not an overly masculine sport, but one that still gives me credibility – and our whole team left bent out of shape. I have a couple scrapes on my knees and elbows I'm nursing, and I wince every time I set my arms down on the table. I'm trying to review my Communications merit badge stuff real quick before the meeting starts. When Nathan approaches me, I ignore him, but I'm half-concentrating on him from the corner of my eye.

“H-hey, uh, Christian?”

“What faggot?” I snap at him, losing more control of my emotions than I had intended.

He quickly blushes and falls into a verbal heap of stuttering and his voice dropping to about the tenth of its volume.

I sigh, trying to sound both tired and annoyed at the same time. I close my book, using my pen to bookmark the page. “What is it Nathan? Spit it out.”

“I-I was h-h-h-hoping y-you might b-b-be able t-t-t-to help m-me out, t-t-teaching me... the bowline knot.” He spits out the last three words in one big rush, hoping maybe that I might forget he stuttered through the whole last sentence? I don’t know.

I too lower my voice, and I glance to make sure no Scoutmasters are in earshot. “Shit man, you gotta work on that stutter. It doesn’t help anything for you.” Again, he blushes, which for some reason annoys the hell out of me. He spends most of his time blushing. But knots were my specialty, and I thought I could teach him quickly. I stare around the room a second time to make sure none of my other friends are watching. “Sure, I can help you.”

I’m surprised as I sit with him, he picks up on the knot pretty quickly. Once he learns it the first time, he can do it several times with guidance and then has memorized it. He explains to me that he often learns this stuff quickly, but it’s hard for him between his disapproving parents and disapproving Scout friends to find those who are willing to help him.

I glance over at my book. I’m tempted to ask him what work he’s done for Communications and the five-minute speech we’re supposed to be writing, but in that moment Cameron’s voice cut through the room.

“Hey, you’re not helping that sissy are you?”

* * *

There’s this unspoken rule at school that we don’t talk about Scouts. We don’t let others know we’re involved. I’ve always wondered why a little bit, because I’ve always considered making fires and owning knives before anyone else a very masculine thing. I love showing off my knife collection.

The next day after this meeting, I pass by Nathan who glances at me. The moment I look over at him however, he lowers his gaze and speeds away obviously terrified. A part of me feels bad, something about last night made me think perhaps he wasn't so bad. I round the corner when I hear it.

There's a loud crash of someone slamming against the locker, followed by the clutter of notebooks and paper falling to the floor. This is a daily routine, and for a second I think nothing of it. Then I think about the night before, and realize I actually want to say something.

I rush back around the corner and see Cameron and a couple others ganging up on him, grabbing his stuff and shoving him around. I went for Cameron first and pulled him off.

"What the fuck man?" He says, confusion mixing into his expression when he realizes it was me. The others quickly stop once they realize Cameron was out. Cameron puffs up his chest and bulks up his size trying to get into my face. It's a move I've seen many, many times, but it's a new experience being directed towards me.

"Enough," I say, not smiling, not moving. "We do that to him every day. Give him a break. He hasn't done anything to you."

Cameron's expression goes slack. It would have been incredibly funny if I weren't afraid of about to be lashed. And so the lashing comes. "So what, are you a fag too?"

I'm prepared for a comment like that one, but it still stings. I wince, but keep staring Cameron down. "Dude, you've known me for years. You know I'm not queer. Why the fuck are you saying this to me?"

"Why the fuck are you defending that sissy?" He gestures down to Nathan on the floor, sniffling.

“I’m not defending him,” I say, fully aware of the ridiculousness of my statement. “I’m just saying lay off him. For one day.” I give him and the other guys a reproachful glare. We had attracted quite a crowd, but I don’t care. They part ways as I head out. “Come on, get up,” I say to Nathan, and we leave together.

“It’s because you’re a fucking Boy Scout, isn’t it? You’ve become a fucking goody two-shoes.” Cameron’s voice slashes through the space between us, driving a cold wedge into my heart. “Yeah, he’s a Boy Scout, and wears a uniform and badges,” he says to the crowd. He keeps going, generating laughter eventually.

I just stare at him, and then at Nathan. I see the hurt in his eyes, but I wonder how much of that is just me reflecting back at myself.

Sleeping with the Answer, 2nd Revision

We were sitting on a pier, looking out across the lake, the sky filled to the brim with stars. The surface was still, mirror-like reflecting the starlight. Mike and I sat off the pier, letting our feet dangle just low enough to skim the surface, sending out ripples. I had one arm wrapped around him, drawing him close for warmth; his head lay on my shoulder.

“It’s a beautiful night,” I said, closing my eyes.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Are you really sure you want to do this? Leave all of it behind?”

“Damn it Chris,” he said, lifting his head to look at me. “For the hundredth time, no. I’m not sure. But I’m going to do it anyway. I love swimming, and it’s just not possible to do it along with Scouts.”

I sighed. All my begging and pleading had had no effect on him. I loved Chris and Scouts, and I wanted to have both forever. “You know, if you stayed in another year, you’d probably be the Senior Patrol Leader.”

“I know. Which is why I can’t. It would be too much for me to handle, doing both.” We lapsed back into silence. “Would you do it? If they asked you?”

I mournfully kicked at the water. “Probably. I mean, I think it’d be really cool.”

Mike sat up, pulling his feet out of the water to sit cross-legged and look at me. “I think you should do it. Seriously.”

Reluctantly I turned to look at him.

“Why? If you go, I want to go too. I love camping and all, but it just wouldn’t be the same without you. I don’t think I want to continue if you don’t.” I wasn’t sure if that was necessarily true however. Being Senior Patrol Leader did sound pretty cool, and it’s not like

Mike and I wouldn't see each other, every day, getting to have sex and whatnot. I guess I just wanted Mike to beg with me a little bit. But he didn't, he just called me out on my BS.

“Chris,” he always gives me a wonderfully dead-pan glare whenever he thinks I'm full of crap. “That has to be one of the stupidest things I think I've ever heard. Of course you're going to stay, you'll be a wonderful Senior Patrol Leader.” After that, he gave me a slight, playful slap to the back of my head, smiling and shaking his head.

We lapsed back into silence, dangling our feet into the water once more, letting the unspoken stay amongst our thoughts, neither one of us wanting to break that final moment, which would mean the end of an era in our lives.

* * *

Beep beep beep bee— I had set my watch for 6:50 in the morning, and after yawning with a good stretch, I felt surprisingly awake. I unzipped my sleeping bag and lay there, enjoying the privacy of a personal tent, one perk of being part of the leadership, or in this case being considered for it. After a few minutes, I put some clothes on and walked outside.

Almost as soon as I was out of the tent, the aroma of the salty sea air intensified, and I took a deep breath. It was a pity that the ocean was to the west; I would have liked to see the sunrise over the ocean. As it were, I tied my shoes and walked down to the shore. It was remarkably calm. The sky was a pale blue, all the stars vanished by this time. Clearly the sun was rising, but the Olympic Mountains stood in its way, casting a strong, almost purple shadow over our campsite. I enjoyed the coolness of the air, and the occasional spray of salt-water splashing on my lips. I wished Mike could have been there to share the moment with me.

The silence was almost magical, and I knew that with the Scouts having to get up in a few minutes, it wasn't going to last. I looked back towards where the cars had dropped us off the

night before. The one cool part about this trip was that adult leaders weren't there for the first half of the week. The backpacking was truly led only by Scouts, in particular those of us who were assigned to be the new leadership of the troop. We left the food cooler in the bear container for the leaders to pick up, and we wouldn't see them for another three days.

In retrospect, it was probably a stupid idea and if the Council ever found out that boys were left unattended even for an hour, we probably would have been shut down. But that's why I like Mr. Forster, our Scoutmaster. Fuck it – he's all for that. If only Mike had been there, it would have been the best Scouting trip I had ever been on.

When at last the sun reached over the mountains, I slowly made my way back to the campsite to a couple of groggy looking Scouts starting to get up.

“Morning Chris.” Grant said automatically, passing me on his way to the latrine. I smiled in return.

“Hey Chris, tell Peter to move his fat ass, he's not getting up!” Jack's voice called out to me from the direction of the tents. I sighed silently. After watching the sky blurring colors in magical ways, I was so not ready to deal with three fourteen year olds. I was almost 18 for crying out loud, ready to be an adult and going off to college soon.

“Yo, Peter,” I said, violently shaking the tent. “Get up. It's time to start packing.”

He merely groaned and rolled over in his sleeping bag.

I was filled with a sudden urge to reach in and slap him, but restrained myself. The most selfish people on these trips don't eat the most, they sleep the most. They keep others from enjoying the planned activities. I turned to Jack. “Just start cleaning up your stuff and get ready to hike out.”

About a half hour later, Jack, Grant and Kyle were standing in front of me, casting longing looks towards the food I had set up for them on the camp table. “Where’s Peter?”

The synchronized eye roll told me all I needed to know.

“Go wake him up. No one’s eating breakfast until he’s up and his stuff is put away.”

The others groaned.

“Attack him for all I care,” I added in an undertone.

Instantly Jack and Grant took off in delight. Kyle stayed behind, looking shyly towards me. I shrugged at him, and sat down at the table.

It wasn’t long before the tents were packed up and the campsite was clean. Jack, Grant and Kyle were all happily eating breakfast. Peter however, was sitting at the picnic table, his arms tightly crossed. “Eat,” I told him.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Bullshit.” It kinda just slipped out. It really isn’t good form at all to swear at younger Scouts, but this was not the morning for bullshit. “You’re hungry now, and you’re going to be hungry later. If you don’t eat breakfast, you’re not getting food until lunch. Eat.” I placed a blueberry muffin in front of him. He glared at me with reproach before picking up the muffin, but I didn’t care. I was going to squeeze him and shove him like stuffing a sleeping bag the whole damn trip if I had to. Then I was going to tell my dad *and* Mike why being a Scout sucks.

“How long are we hiking today?” Kyle asked.

“Not far. Only about five miles, and then we’ll meet with John’s group for lunch, just before reaching our campsite.”

Once we started hiking, it wasn’t until we stopped for our first break that we noticed Peter wasn’t with the rest of the group. I growled in annoyance, set my pack down, and hurried

back along the path. As it turned out, he was less than five minutes behind, but I caught him peeing right on the trail, not bothering to cover for privacy. “There are so many things wrong with that,” I told him, walking up as he zipped his pants, “that I’m not even going to try to explain it to you. Come on, you’re fourteen years old. You should know better than that.”

He merely rolled his eyes, and walked past me without a word.

The little ass. Then I thought that maybe I should have given him more privacy, or warning at least. But how was I supposed to know he was *peeing* on the trail? Coming back to the group, I took a sip from my Nalgene water bottle. “Peter, I want you in front of the group. Take the pace for our next segment.” Without a word, they all hoisted their packs up, and continued on the trail. Quickly it became clear to me that this was a mistake as well. Soon he was out of sight.

“Shouldn’t we go after him?” Kyle asked me uncertainly.

“Let him go. If he gets himself lost, he’ll be the one whining to us.”

* * *

I had barely finished setting up my tent before the quarrelling started.

“Give it back!”

“Give what back?”

“Give it BACK!”

Growling, I stood up and walked over to Kyle and Peter fighting. Kyle was on the verge of tears, his face bright red, and Peter was calmly smirking. “What’s going on here?” I demanded.

“Peter stole my journal that my mom gave me!” Kyle shouted.

“I did not!” he protested.

I said nothing. We had a staring contest for about ten seconds before he finally caved in.

“I wasn’t going to *steal* it, Kyle said I could borrow a few pages,” he said spitefully, throwing it at Kyle. Then he stalked off, but I caught up with him and cut him off.

“Listen Peter,” I said in as low and menacing of a voice as I could. “You want to act like a brat? Fine. You want to act like a selfish pig? Fine. But I will not let you ruin this experience for the other Scouts, just because you want to be at home playing on your Xbox One, ok?”

He wrenched his wrist free from my grasp, and walked off, casting me a malevolent look.

* * *

Dusk brought with it a crescendo of cricket chirps and swarms of mosquitos. I sought out privacy. I was desperate for it. Junior high schoolers are unbelievably aggravating. I left behind our campsite to head towards the alpine lake, maybe 200 feet away, with towel in hand, to where I knew a deep section was. Deep enough, even, to swim. Standing on the shore, I stripped completely naked. For a moment, before I leapt, I glanced around. The lake was in the middle of a clearing between trees. We had a clear view of the sky. The trees bordered the lake, spreading their branches majestically into the air, as if they were reaching for the stars. I felt the moistness hanging in the air, and saw it clinging to the moss sitting mute on the tree trunks.

Finally I jumped into the lake, knowing that it would be the only way I’d get myself into the melted mountain snow, which was the lake. God, I felt myself shrink so much in the cold, I was surprised there was anything left.

As the last dark purples of sunset faded to black, I stared up at the starry sky, gently floating on my back. I was completely at peace, surrounded by starlight reflecting in the swirling waters I swam in. The cold surrounded my body from all sides, so I turned onto my stomach and started swimming laps in the deep end of the lake. I enjoyed the feeling of my muscles sweeping

through the water, and for a brief moment, I understood why Mike had left camping for swimming.

After I was sufficiently tired out, and thoroughly cold to the bone, I finally got out and dried myself off, letting the warm air envelop my naked body. For a minute, I stood there, dropping my towel, enjoying the freedom of standing in the open, completely exposed and unshrinking again. Then I heard a voice coming from the wood, and instantly became self-conscious and wrapped the towel around my waist. Then I listened curiously. It wasn't someone talking. The sound was sniffing, and the voice kept catching, the way it would if someone were crying and they were unable to silence their sobs.

The towel wrapped tightly around my waist, I slipped my feet into my sneakers and went to investigate the sobbing. Surely Kyle couldn't still be upset about his journal could he? Then I felt guilty for thinking that. It wouldn't have been beyond Peter to actually rip out a few of the pages, like he claimed he was going to.

He was there, sitting in a clearing under the moonlight, his face pressed to his knees, with his arms wrapped around his legs. But it wasn't Kyle sitting there crying. It was Peter. Not sure what to do, I decided to go sit down next to him.

"Go away," he said, before I could speak, not lifting his face from his knees.

"Peter, what's wrong?"

He ignored me, and just kept crying. I wasn't going to relent so easily however. I decided to sit there silently for a few minutes. Part of me really didn't want to do anything with his crying, and just to let him figure his own way back out over to the Troop. But part of me felt sorry for having been so rough with him earlier. After all, I knew what it was like having to

follow rules that perhaps didn't quite make sense to you – hell, that was me and Mike every day. Well, at least until he quit Scouting. Now we were free to kiss and fuck whenever we liked.

“I understand what you must be feeling,” I said finally. Honestly, I had no idea if I did or not. I just wanted to see if he would respond. He did not. “It's not easy having to follow all these rules, being told what to do, I get it that you probably don't like it.” Still no response. I let the silence sit for a couple more minutes. “But you have to treat people with more respect.”

“Why?” He croaked, his voice thick with sobs.

I looked over at him, surprised he had responded. “Because that's what people want. When they feel respected, they are more likely to give it.”

“But why do I have to, when they don't?”

For the first time, I felt unsure about myself. Had I been wrong the whole time? “What do you mean? All day, we've just been trying to get you to just go along with the crowd.”

He sniffled some more before speaking. “But they're mean, whenever you're not around. They call me names. And I swear Kyle said he was going to let me have some pages from his book. But he thought I had taken it too quickly from him and that I was just going to steal the book, but I swear I wasn't.”

I sighed. The damn book. “Honestly Peter, I don't think the book is that important. I believe you, but it's not really such a big deal. But what's this about the names they call you?”

He clammed up again however, and didn't say anything for another few minutes. Finally he spoke, ignoring the question. “Nobody likes me here.”

I was so surprised, that I almost asked him to repeat it. “Peter, that's because you don't give anybody a chance to like you.”

“But nobody’s ever liked me. Even when I moved here at the end of last year, nobody would talk to me.”

“That’s because you weren’t exactly Scout of the Year then either.”

He looked confused at me, but he was finally dry-eyed.

“I mean, if you want people to be friends with you, you have to be willing to be friends with them first. People aren’t just going to approach you because you think you deserve it. If you want proof, apologize to Kyle tomorrow. Go see what a difference it makes.”

We fell into silence. I let out a big breath and stared around the forest. At night, everything looked more mysterious, the moss on the trees no longer visible. Everything was a dark silhouette against the night sky, shadows swaying gently in the breeze.

I saw him look over at me from the corner of my eye.

“Are you a swimmer?”

I sat still for a minute. How much should I reveal? “No, but my boyfriend is.” I was glad it was so dark, so he wouldn’t see me blushing. “Do you want to go for a swim?” I asked suddenly. And before he had time to refuse, I grabbed him by his hand and pulled him to his feet. I dragged him down to the shore, where reluctantly he agreed and stripped down as well. We went skinny dipping together. After drying out in the open air, the water attacked my body in fresh waves of stinging cold. But I went all in and started splashing him until he caved and ran fully into the lake. Eventually we had splashed each other so much, we had worked up a sweat and the cold no longer was harsh but rather soothing.

Peter came up behind me and tried to shove me into the water to wrestle. He wasn’t very successful, being three years younger than me and significantly less muscular, but I played along, and wrestled against him in the water. I won every round, pinning him down on the silty

lake bed, and eventually I even stopped worrying about how much I should be touching him, and we just went all out. It ended when I pinned myself down on top of him, and water and silt sliding between our naked bodies.

I started laughing looking at him, our faces inches apart.

He closed his eyes and smiled.

“Had enough?” I asked him.

He nodded, and so we got up and made our way to the shore, drying off with our towels, before laying them out on the dirt. We both lay down, not saying much, just staring up at the starry sky.

“Should we go back to the campsite?” He finally asked.

“We’re fine,” I said, really not wanting to get up. “They’re just around the bend of trees like 200 feet away. We’ll know if anything goes wrong.”

Peter nodded, still looking up at the sky.

Then a crazy thought came to me, and I don’t know what exactly drove me to do this, but I scooted closer to him, and wrapped one arm around his chest. “You’ll be fine Peter,” I told him when he looked at me in surprise. “Just talk to the other guys, like I said, apologize, and you’ll be surprised at the result.”

He shrugged as best he could, and then turned on his side and cuddled up against me.

The sunlight was streaming through the woods, just beyond the pond’s shores. I was warm. Unusually warm. It took me a moment to realize that it was more than just the sun on my face. Peter had rolled over in the middle of the night, and our lips were practically touching, his arm reaching around and resting against my ass. I felt my face grow red, and I grew stiff as well, even though it felt totally wrong. It wasn’t like I had never cuddled with guys before, and indeed

I didn't think it was a huge problem that I had moved to cuddle with Peter the night before. He seemed like he really needed that, but I didn't have any kind of desire for Peter actually. Sure, he was cute, and the way a strand of his blonde hair draped over his eyes while he slept amplified that by a thousand, but he was still 14.

Then in a moment of panic, I realized that any of the other Scouts could have already seen us. I quietly slipped out from Peter's arms, and put some clothes on, quaking at the thought that someone might have seen us. It had seemed like a good idea the night before, but maybe I had been just horny and in desperate need of Mike. Shit. Mike. I needed to let Peter know later that I couldn't be there for him. That this had been a mistake.

* * *

We arrived back in base camp an hour early. We were the only group designated to hike right into basecamp, and clearly we had caught the adult leaders by surprise, for they were still lounging around with coffee, enjoying a late brunch.

Mr. Forster came up to me, as I set my pack down. "Well, it looks like your group had a lot of fun," he said, pointing to Jack and Grant laughing, and Peter and Kyle whispering stories to each other. "I'll be curious to hear how you got Peter involved in the group."

"It's an interesting story," I told him, grinning.

That day ended up being another beautiful sunny day. Done with the individual packing trip, I sat down in a camp chair and closed my eyes. The breeze whispered across my face, and I could hear birds chirping up in the trees, out of sight. The sun was gentle, and finally I felt relaxed. The trip was over.

I must have dozed off, because suddenly Peter was shaking my shoulder. "The Scoutmaster wants to see you."

Dread flooded me. Surely someone had seen Peter and I sleeping together and reported it to him. I started preparing excuses in my mind, and my offer to drop out of consideration to be SPL, and even the Troop if it was necessary. Since May, I had always pictured dropping out of Scouts. But not like this. Not after navigating years of dating Mike. Finally I arrived at his tent. To my horror, the previous Senior Patrol Leader, John, was there too.

“Hey Chris, thanks for coming over. Sorry to wake you up from that nap. John and I were talking, and we were discussing who would make a good replacement. We were talking about it, and felt comfortable asking you first, of the three Scout leaders we sent out this trip, if you would like to take his place?”

My mind reeled at the request. I stared back at Kyle and Peter, who had now joined in with John’s group in running around and laughing.

“It’s clear you’ve got some talent somewhere,” Mr. Forster said.

“I need to think about it. Can I get back to you?”

“Of course.”

Slowly I wandered away. So sure, I had been, that I was about to be kicked out. Before I made up my mind, I needed to call Mike and tell him what happened.

“Hey, Chris! Everything ok?”

I took a deep breath. No, everything was not ok. I was more confused and conflicted than when Mike had dropped out. Before I could say anything I started crying. Mike just sat and waited. Finally I calmed down, and told him everything. I told him how Peter had been acting like a jack-ass on the trip, how he had been mistreating everyone on the trip. Then I told him about swimming in the lake, and then hearing Peter crying and our conversation after that.

“And then, after we wrestled, we dried out on the shore, and oh my God Mike I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

Silence for a moment. “Did you guys have sex?”

For a moment, it seemed like the world was holding its breath, waiting for the answer.

“No.”

There was a groan from the other end of the phone. “Jesus fucking Christ Chris, you called me and start crying as if it’s the end of the world, and you didn’t even fuck together?” He started laughing, but if it was in humor or in relief I couldn’t tell.

“I don’t get it.”

“Well let me say good, for one. And two, what the hell did happen then? And don’t start crying again.”

I chuckled. “We slept together, and during the night I think he tried to make out with me, or do something, he had wrapped himself up around me.”

Mike was quiet for a minute. “Did it help him?” He finally asked, sounding serious.

“Well, he’s talking and laughing with the others, so if that counts...” We were silent for a minute. “Mike, I don’t know what to do. I can help these Scouts, but I don’t think I can do it this way. I’m scared that something more may happen next time.”

He sighed. “I can’t tell you what to do. I love you, and I trust you. I always have, and I still do, even after everything you’ve told me. I don’t know, it just seems to me that on this trip you listened to your heart, and if you can’t trust that, than I’m not sure who or what you can trust then.”

“Ok, thanks Mike. I’ll talk to you when I get back?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I watched the Scouts running back and forth with the football. I really wanted to stay, but could I? Was there still a place in Scouting for me? Mike had told me to listen to my heart. What kind of bullshit advice was that? It didn't help any at the end of the day.

As the day went on, I realized more and more that I didn't have the heart to tell Mr. Forster no, that I would carry on, never knowing if it was really the right choice.

Break the Rules with Me, Please, 3rd Revision

We were sitting on a pier, looking out across the lake, the sky filled to the brim with stars. The surface was still, mirror-like reflecting the starlight. Mike and I sat off the pier, letting our feet dangle just low enough to skim the surface, sending out ripples. I had one arm wrapped around him, drawing him close for warmth; his head lay on my shoulder.

“It’s a beautiful night,” I said, closing my eyes.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Are you really sure you want to do this? Leave all of it behind?”

“Damn it Chris,” he said, lifting his head to look at me. “For the hundredth time, no. I’m not sure. But I’m going to do it anyway. I love swimming, and it’s just not possible to do it along with Scouts.”

I sighed. All my begging and pleading had had no effect on him. I loved Mike and Scouts, and I wanted to have both forever. “You know, if you stayed in another year, you’d probably be the Senior Patrol Leader.”

“I know. Which is why I can’t. It would be too much for me to handle, doing both.” We lapsed back into silence. “Would you do it? If they asked you?”

I mournfully kicked at the water. “Probably. I mean, I think it’d be really cool.”

Mike sat up, pulling his feet out of the water to sit cross-legged and look at me. “I think you should do it. Seriously.”

Reluctantly I turned to look at him. “You’d make a better SPL than me. We both know it.”

“What are you talking about? You’ve been Patrol Leader more than I have. You’d do great at it.”

“Why? If you go, I want to go too. I love camping and all, but it just wouldn’t be the same without you. I don’t think I want to continue if you don’t.” I wasn’t sure if that was necessarily true however. Being Senior Patrol Leader did sound pretty cool, and it’s not like Mike and I wouldn’t see each other, every day, getting to have sex and whatnot. I guess I just wanted Mike to beg with me a little bit. But he didn’t, he just called me out on my BS.

“Chris,” he always gives me a wonderfully dead-pan glare whenever he thinks I’m full of crap. “That has to be one of the stupidest things I think I’ve ever heard. Of course you’re going to stay, you’ll be a wonderful Senior Patrol Leader.” After that, he gave me a slight, playful slap to the back of my head, smiling and shaking his head.

I grinned. “But who am I going to illicitly have sex with when I go camping now?”

Mike sighed. “If it’s really that big of a problem, you know we have a pretty open relationship. Just hook-up with one of the other seniors.” He stared at me for a second. “But then you have to tell me about it, and how good they were.” And we both burst out laughing. Mike was being sarcastic about telling him of course, but it was comforting to know that he was still ok with the open relationship.

We lapsed back into silence, dangling our feet into the water once more, letting the unspoken stay amongst our thoughts, neither one of us wanting to break that final moment, which would mean the end of an era in our lives.

* * *

Beep beep beep bee— I had set my watch for 6:50 in the morning, and after yawning with a good stretch, I felt surprisingly awake. I unzipped my sleeping bag and lay there, enjoying the privacy of a personal tent, one perk of being part of the leadership. It was my first stint as being SPL for the Troop, and while the privacy was nice, I still rolled to my side and stard at where

Mike usually lay next to me. I really missed him, having him in my tent. After a few minutes, I put some clothes on and walked outside.

Almost as soon as I was out of the tent, the aroma of the salty sea air intensified, and I took a deep breath. It was a pity that the ocean was to the west; I would have liked to see the sunrise over the ocean. As it were, I tied my shoes and walked down to the shore. It was remarkably calm. The sky was a pale blue, all the stars vanished by this time. Clearly the sun was rising, but the Olympic Mountains stood in its way, casting a strong, almost purple shadow over our campsite. I enjoyed the coolness of the air, and the occasional spray of salt-water splashing on my lips. I wished Mike could have been there to share the moment with me. I wished we could have had sex then. Or maybe one of the other seniors as Mike so boldly suggested. I had been hoping to be assigned the juniors and seniors, so I might hook-up – there was one other guy than Mike and I, but John, one of my Assistant SPLs had gotten that group.

The silence was almost magical, and I knew that with the Scouts having to get up in a few minutes, it wasn't going to last. I looked back towards where the cars had dropped us off the night before. One cool thing about this trip was that adult leaders weren't there for the first half of the week. The backpacking was truly led only by Scouts, in particular those of us who were assigned to be the new leadership of the troop. We left the food cooler in the bear container for the leaders to pick up, and we wouldn't see them for another three days.

In retrospect, it was probably a stupid idea and if the Council ever found out that boys were left unattended even for an hour, we probably would have been shut down. But that's why I like Mr. Forster, our Scoutmaster. Fuck it – he's all for that. If only Mike had been there, it would have been the best Scouting trip I had ever been on.

When at last the sun reached over the mountains, I slowly made my way back to the campsite to a couple of groggy looking Scouts starting to get up.

“Morning Chris.” Aaron said automatically, passing me on his way to the latrine. I smiled in return.

“Hey Chris, tell Peter to move his fat ass, he’s not getting up!” Jonathan’s voice called out to me from the direction of the tents. I sighed silently. After watching the sky blurring colors in magical ways, I felt unprepared for this. Mike was always better at handling the rowdy Scouts than me.

“Yo, Peter,” I said, violently shaking the tent. “Get up. It’s time to start packing.”

He merely groaned and rolled over in his sleeping bag.

I was filled with a sudden urge to reach in and slap him, but restrained myself. The most selfish people on these trips don’t eat the most, they sleep the most. They keep others from enjoying the planned activities. I turned to Jonathan. “Just start cleaning up your stuff and get ready to hike out.”

About a half hour later, Jonathan, Aaron and Kyle were standing in front of me, casting longing looks towards the food I had set up for them on the camp table. “Where’s Peter?”

The synchronized eye roll told me all I needed to know.

“Go wake him up. No one’s eating breakfast until he’s up and his stuff is put away.”

The others groaned.

“Attack him for all I care,” I added in an undertone.

Instantly Jonathan and Aaron took off in delight. Kyle stayed behind, looking shyly towards me. I shrugged at him, and sat down at the table.

It wasn't long before the tents were packed up and the campsite was clean. Jonathan, Aaron and Kyle were all happily eating breakfast. Peter however, was sitting at the picnic table, his arms tightly crossed. "Eat," I told him.

"I'm not hungry."

"Bullshit." It kinda just slipped out. It really isn't good form at all to swear at younger Scouts, but this was not the morning for bullshit. "You're hungry now, and you're going to be hungry later. If you don't eat breakfast, you're not getting food until lunch. Eat." I placed a blueberry muffin in front of him. He glared at me with reproach before picking up the muffin, but I didn't care. I was going to squeeze him and shove him like stuffing a sleeping bag the whole damn trip if I had to.

"How long are we hiking today?" Kyle asked.

"Not far. Only about five miles, and then we'll meet with John's group for lunch, just before reaching our campsite." John had taken the seniors from our troop on a different, overlapping trail.

Once we started hiking, it wasn't until we stopped for our first break that we noticed Peter wasn't with the rest of the group. I growled in annoyance, set my pack down, and hurried back along the path. As it turned out, he was less than five minutes behind, but I caught him peeing right on the trail, not bothering to cover for privacy. "There are so many things wrong with that," I told him, walking up as he zipped his pants, "that I'm not even going to try to explain it to you. Come on, you're fourteen years old. You should know better than that."

He merely rolled his eyes, and walked past me without a word.

The little ass. Then I thought that maybe I should have given him more privacy, or warning at least. But how was I supposed to know he was *peeing* on the trail? And was it bad to

think that he didn't even have enough down there to flaunt it openly like that? Coming back to the group, I took a sip from my Nalgene water bottle. "Peter, I want you in front of the group. Take the pace for our next segment." Without a word, they all hoisted their packs up, and continued on the trail. Quickly it became clear to me that this was a mistake as well. Soon he was out of sight.

"Shouldn't we go after him?" Kyle asked me uncertainly.

"Let him go. If he gets himself lost, he'll be the one whining to us."

* * *

After dinner, dusk set in pretty quickly and brought with it a crescendo of cricket chirps and swarms of mosquitos. As I was putting away the last few dishes, Jonathan came up to me. "Um, Chris, have you seen Peter? It's been a while since we've seen him."

I sighed. Again? "Seriously? Alright, I'll go look for him. I want the rest of you to get ready for bed. You can stay up still, but get to your sleeping bags soon." Once everything was put away, I sighed. If I were Peter, where would I go late at night? There was a small lake just around a bend of trees near our campsite that I decided to go check. There he was, sitting at the shore. I sighed with relief.

Next I sought out privacy. I was desperate for it. I headed towards the alpine lake, grabby my towel, to where I knew a deep section was across from Peter. Deep enough, even, to swim. Standing on the shore, I stripped completely naked. For a moment, before I leapt, I glanced around. The lake was in the middle of a clearing between trees. We had a clear view of the sky. The trees bordered the lake, spreading their branches majestically into the air, as if they were reaching for the stars. I felt the moistness hanging in the air, and saw it clinging to the moss sitting mute on the tree trunks.

Finally I jumped in, knowing that it would be the only way I'd get myself into the melted mountain snow, which was the lake. God, I felt myself shrink so much in the cold, I was surprised there was anything left.

As the last dark purples of sunset faded to black, I stared up at the starry sky, gently floating on my back. I was completely at peace, surrounded by starlight reflecting in the swirling waters I swam in. The cold surrounded my body from all sides, so I turned onto my stomach and started swimming laps in the deep end of the lake. I enjoyed the feeling of my muscles sweeping through the water, and for a brief moment, I understood why Mike had left camping for swimming.

After I was sufficiently tired out, and thoroughly cold to the bone, I finally got out and dried myself off, letting the warm air envelop my naked body. For a minute, I stood there, dropping my towel, enjoying the freedom of standing in the open, completely exposed and unshrinking again. Sufficiently warmed up, I wrapped the towel around my waist. Suddenly I felt a hand on my back. Jumping slightly, I took a breath when I realized it was just Peter. He too was only wearing a towel. "Oh, hey Peter, what's up?" I tried keeping my voice amiable, hoping that it might help circumvent that animosity from earlier in the day.

"I saw you swimming. You're a pretty good swimmer."

"Thanks, I said, staring at him, uncomfortably aware that his hand was still on me. "My boyfriend is a swimmer. He's given me a few lessons."

"Your boyfriend, huh? So you are gay then?" He turned away finally, towards the lake, putting his hands on his waist.

"Yes..." I said, feeling less sure what was going on now. "Most of the troop knows that. Mr. Forster welcomes gay scouts."

“Oh, he does?” Peter sounded genuinely surprised, which wasn’t that strange, thinking about it.

I kept forgetting that he was new to the troop. He had moved into town towards the end of last school year. “Why do you ask?”

He stared stone-faced out across the lake. “How do you do it? Live with it everyday? Go to Scouts with it every week?”

I stood there watching the lake as well. I decided not to say anything. There really wasn’t anything to say. There was no answer to that question.

Suddenly to my great surprise, Peter moved swiftly, and I found myself mouth to mouth with Peter, and him gently grabbing my head as he kissed me. “God, you’re so hot,” he whispered, pulling off. He started reaching down for my towel, which is when I finally regained movement and backed up.

“Yo, Peter, stop. That’s off limits. You can’t do that.”

His eyes shone brighter in the moonlight and he grinned, as if I had just given him some sort of challenge. “Why not?”

My eyes bugged out of my head. Was this why Peter had been driving me crazy all day? Had he been *flirting* with me? “Why not?” I repeated. “Well, because I am your SPL, and because I am 17 years old. You’re 14.”

“Oh, come on. I turn 15 in a week. I’m in high school, and it’s not like we both haven’t had sex. Come on.”

“First off, you’re barely a freshmen. I’m a senior. Secondly, no.”

He didn’t say anything. He simply leaned forward and kissed me again.

I tried to back up, but now was up against a tree. Peter didn't relent. A moment later he let his towel drop, and pressed his body up against me.

"Oh man," I mumbled through the kiss. I tried half-heartedly to push him off; I could feel his erection through my towel and was surprised that a nearly 15-year-old could be so big. I started to stiffen up, and as much as I knew this was wrong, I kind of didn't want him to stop. He was a really fucking good kisser, and I had wanted this all day. Finally I found the strength to firmly push him off. "Dude, seriously, you need to stop." In that moment, he finally undid my towel, and it fell in the dirt.

"Really? You're going to tell me to stop? You want me to keep going. I can physically see that," and before I said anything else, he knelt down in front of me and everything else vanished into a haze of pleasure.

The sunlight was streaming through the woods, just beyond the lake's shores. I was warm. Unusually warm. It took me a moment to realize that it was more than just the sun on my face. Peter and I were on our towels, still flecked with dirt, cuddled together. I groggily looked up at the sky, trying to piece together everything that happened to lead to this. Peter had come on to me, and I was so fucking horny. Before I could recollect further, I thought I heard a tent door zip from the campsite – shit, I had left camp unattended – nah, I was only a couple hundred feet away, that's still pretty close.

But then in my moment of panic, I realized that any of the other Scouts could have already seen us. I quietly slipped out from Peter's arms, and put my clothes back on, quaking at the thought that someone might have seen us.

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We arrived back in base camp an hour early. We were the only group designated to hike right into basecamp, and clearly we had caught the adult leaders by surprise, for they were still lounging around with coffee, enjoying a late brunch.

Mr. Forster came up to me, as I set my pack down. “Well, it looks like your group had a lot of fun,” he said, pointing to Jonathan and Aaron laughing, and Peter and Kyle whispering stories to each other. “I’ll be curious to hear how you got Peter involved in the group.”

“It’s an interesting story,” I told him, grinning.

That day ended up being another beautiful sunny day. Done with the individual packing trip, I sat down in a camp chair and closed my eyes. The breeze whispered across my face, and I could hear birds chirping up in the trees, out of sight. The sun was gentle, and finally I felt relaxed. The trip was over.

I must have dozed off, because suddenly Peter was shaking my shoulder. “The Scoutmaster wants to see you.”

Dread flooded me. Surely someone had seen Peter and I sleeping together and reported it to him. I started preparing excuses in my mind, as well as my offer to relinquish the SPL title, and even drop from the Troop if it was necessary. Finally I arrived at his tent. To my horror, the previous Senior Patrol Leader, John, was there too.

“Hey Chris, thanks for coming over. Sorry to wake you up from that nap. John and I were talking, and we wanted to confirm with you that you’re still interested in being SPL.”

My mind reeled at the question. I glanced back at Peter, who had now joined in with John’s group in running around and laughing.

“It’s clear you’ve got skill at bringing Scouts together. Even those who are outsiders. That’s valuable to have as a leader,” Mr. Forster said.

“Yes, I’m interested.” My mind was still muddled with emotions and confusion. It didn’t really register with me what I was saying.

“Excellent.”

Slowly I wandered away. I had been so sure that I was about to be kicked out. I needed to call Mike and tell him what happened.

“Hey, Chris! Everything ok?”

I took a deep breath. No, everything was not ok. I was more confused and conflicted than when Mike had dropped out. Before I could say anything I started crying. Mike just waited silently. Finally I calmed down, and told him everything. I told him how Peter had been acting like a Jonathan-ass on the trip. Then I told him about Peter’s coming on to me at the lake. And then how happy he’s been since last night. And how Mr. Forster thinks I’m just really good at leading.

Silence for a moment. “Did you guys have sex?”

I paused. Should I tell him the truth? Honestly, I wasn’t quite sure what the truth was.

“Ok. Forget for a moment that you were his SPL,” he said, sounding increasingly annoyed with every word. “Did you fuck a fucking 14 year old?”

For a moment, it seemed like the world was holding its breath, waiting for the answer. “No. I did not have sex with him.” I mean, really, how far do you have to go until you’ve had sex, right?

There was a sigh from the other end of the phone. “Good. He’s 14 years old. I don’t care if he sucked you off. I really don’t. You just need to leave him alone.”

“You don’t think I know that?” I asked, feeling impatient. I called wanting support, not a lecture.

“I trust you,” he said, half-whispering. Then a second later, “I love you.”

“I love you too. Talk when we get back?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

I watched the Scouts running back and forth with the football. I knew Mike was right, but Peter had aroused my curiosity (among other things). Maybe he was right too, that he would be 15 in a week. That isn’t so bad, is it? We’re only two year apart. I mean, sure, it’s breaking the rules, but rules are meant to be broken. Right?

Are You Grinning at Me?

The best time of year to be an identical twin is Halloween. Especially in high school, when all of our friends started recognizing the way we dressed, Tom and I would switch clothes. People always fell for it. Every year.

I'm Tyler, by the way. Most people call me Tyler at least. I've also been called the prankster, the trickster, or my personal favorite, the Joker. After all, why so serious? Sorry, I can't help it. I have to do my impersonation every time.

Basically, I like pulling practical jokes every chance I get in case you couldn't tell. And when you're an identical twin, the jokes are practically endless. Switching clothes, switching names, sometimes even switching classes. Did you hear about the time that James and Oliver Phelps (the Weasley twins in the Harry Potter movies) switched characters on set? Apparently they filmed over half the movie before they were caught, and supposedly had to re-shoot all those scenes they had switched. Honestly, I don't know what the difference would be, but I hope that's true. That's funny. That's the perk of being an identical twin.

That's one way Tom and I are identical, is our love for pranks, though usually mine are more successful, and better, I'd say. The only thing that can parallel our love for jokes though, is our love for the outdoors. We're both Boy Scouts, nearly Eagles (well, Tom is). I'm less devoted to the Scouts, I don't think being an Eagle is in my future, but at least I have fun where I'm at.

We're about to head into our senior year in high school, but I won't tell you about that. The summer before, Tom and I had decided to staff at our Boy Scout Council's summer camp. I was a chef for the summer, and Tom was an aquatics counselor. Until last summer, I had always wondered why he enjoyed the aquatic station so much: because he wasn't a huge swimmer, and in general, actually hated the water. Last summer, Tom came out to me, which was a huge

surprise. It was a super emotional moment to, he completely broke down crying (something I'm definitely not used to) and we stayed up all night just talking, and didn't go to sleep until after we watched the sunrise together.

Being identical twins, and being straight, I had just assumed he was as well. So now of course, the whole lake thing makes sense: he's surrounded by half-nude men, many of whom either swim or do some other sport. You can picture the type of men I'm talking about.

Naturally I was cool with it, his being gay. I used to make fun of him on our Scout trips, asking if he had ever bent over for anyone, or if he had ever asked anyone to suck his... well, you get the idea. It used to drive him crazy, and his face would get so red, it was amazing blood didn't start pouring out of every orifice. I died laughing every time, while he vehemently denied it. It was only fun while he denied it though. He shut me up pretty good when he started telling me (in response) about how huge Michael was even before he got hard, or how Bryant gave really good head. I stopped asking. There were some brotherhood details I didn't need.

Anyway, this camp I was talking about, Camp Wichita, it's an awesome camp. It's very mountainous, so a lot of emphasis is put on rock climbing. The cliffs are sort of staggered, like mega huge stairs, and below the climbing walls, at the very base and edge of the lowest rock face is Lake Eagle, where Tom works with his other half-nude staff. Beyond the shores of the lake is the forest – an ancient pine forest, very green and mossy. It is in this forest where most of the stations are (wood cutting, forestry, high ropes course, etc.) along with the camping areas for both staffers as well as the campers, albeit on opposite sides of camp.

Lake Eagle is the most popular place to hangout at camp, especially at night for staffers after campers have gone to bed at 10:30. My routine was to stop by the concession stand, grab a hotdog, and soak my feet, sitting on the farthest life guard dock. Tonight was glow in the dark

snorkeling, where the aquatics staff had music pumping, and other staff members were dumping in and retrieving glow in the dark toys from the bottom of the lake. This is where Tom and our camp friend Sam found me.

“I thought I would find you here,” Tom said, sitting next to me. “Hotdog? Can I have a bite?”

I smiled close-lipped through my chewing. Tom could be so predictable. Without speaking, I held it out for him to take a bit from my hand.

“God, I’m so horny,” he said, swallowing his bite.

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered, “sex is always on your mind.”

“Especially when I’m in heaven,” he gestured to the 50 or so high school men in and around the lake. “Hey! You think there are 72 guys here who are virgins? Maybe I’m already there!”

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. Part of me wanted to call out his comment as Islamophobic, but I also knew he wasn’t even slightly serious. And was this true of all gay men? Were they all really this horny? I sometimes wished he would have a little more shame. After all, he was the only one who knew I wasn’t still a virgin. “Just promise me that you’re going to keep your dick in your pants this summer. The campers are off limits.”

He chuckled.

Suddenly, a glow ring splashed at our feet, and we watched the swimmer stroke vigorously to the lake bottom, and emerge gasping at our feet. He grinned at us before swimming away.

“I know campers are off limits. So maybe I shouldn’t tell you about the high school senior I’ve had my eye on. You know, the blonde one with the great ass?” He gestured to a guy

over on the shore, dancing to the music. “I think his name is Mitch or Michael. Something like that. – I’m kidding,” he added, noticing my expression.

I watched the guy throwing a glow-in-the-dark Frisbee, while dancing to the music in between passes. He wasn’t a bad looking guy, standing about 6’2 or so. Obviously he played some sport for his arms were pretty packed with muscle, and in all honesty, he did have a pretty great ass. Then I shook my head. I knew Tom well enough to know that unfortunately he was only half-kidding.

We continued to watch the guys swimming around. Slowly, the lake started emptying out, and the glow-sticks piled up on the shore. Eventually Mitch and his friends decided to pack up. Mitch waved back at the remaining staff members, though he was too far away for him to know who any of us were.

“Alright,” Tom said, standing up. “I’m going to bed. Good night y’all.”

* * *

As a chef, I usually don’t work in the serving line, as that’s usually Dining Hall Staff that do that. Every so often though, there’s “meet the chefs” day where we not only make the food, but serve it too. I had never fully appreciated or even understood the grueling aspects of the job. A series of staff members stand in a line, conveyor belt style, and we each dish out one part of the meal. I don’t know how those guys maintain such a humorous attitude when dishing out food. “Can’t I get more?” or “What the hell is that?” are frequent questions. There were times I definitely wanted to smack them. Or prank them. *Where’s the milk you ask? It’s in that machine over there, next to the coffee. ... Oh, was that coffee creamer? I’m sorry. My bad.* No, I never actually did that, but the desire was overwhelming at times.

It was the first meet the chefs day when I had my first, unpleasant encounter with Mitch. I stood there, dishing out “enchilada squares” (whatever the heck that means) to each scout, and I was getting so bored and tired, I hadn’t really been paying attention, so I was surprised when Mitch appeared in front of me, looking confused.

“Don’t you work in aquatics Tom?”

I half-smiled. I was too exhausted to do much more than that. “I’m Tyler, his twin brother.” I hope that my tone didn’t sound too bitchy.

“Ah,” he said, tilting his head up and looking at me through narrowed eyes. “You typically work in the kitchen?”

“Yup.”

“That’s probably why I never see you then.”

I nodded wearily, hoping that he would just move onto the next the guy.

He nodded back at me, and then grinned and winked at me, flicking his hair to the side with his hand. At least, that’s what it looked like. Maybe he just brushed it out of his eyes. And the wink was a very slick wink too. I almost missed it.

What the fuck...? I thought. Did a camper just hit on me? Or was it my imagination? I must have been paranoid about it after Tom making the jokes about keeping his eye on Mitch. Eventually I put the moment out of my mind, and went back to life as usual. I decided to say nothing to Tom about it.

This worked all right until about a week later. I was on cleaning crew in the kitchen (kitchen staff rotated every week, something about the budget not being able to afford five more people to be full time cleaning staff. I guess that makes sense. Anyway, I was out back, using the

hose to help scrape off large chunks of food out of the massive pots we use to cook, when none other than Mitch walked by.

“Yeah, clean those dishes honey,” he said, walking up to me.

I looked up and gave him dead-pan glare. It was hot, I was in the sun, my neck was sore from looking down at the pot for so long, and my fingers ached from holding the pot and scraping at it as well. Needless to say, I was not in the mood. “Do you want something Mitch?” I asked, trying to keep the irritability out.

“Nah, just thought I’d come by and say hi,” he said, sitting on the bench next to me.

“How’s working in the kitchen?”

I was caught off guard by the simplicity of his answer. No one ever comes by the kitchen staff just to say hi. Naturally, I was immediately suspicious of him. “Don’t you have a merit badge lesson to be at?” Immediately I regretted saying it that bluntly. I wasn’t trying to be mean.

“Ouch. Ok, I can take a hint,” he didn’t look the slightest bit hurt though. He stood up to leave. He started walking away and then turned back. “I was just wondering if you were at all like Tom.”

“In what way?”

“You know, like... fun.” He then opened his mouth, and pushed his cheek out with his tongue several times. He grinned in that particularly boyish way of his.

I was so shocked, I didn’t know what to do. I stood there, staring at him. “No, absolutely not. Stay away from me,” we stared at each other, “and stay the fuck away from my brother too.”

He shrugged, and then walked away.

I watched him until he was out of sight. Clearly he wasn’t taking advantage of the camp barber who came once a week. His hair was just over his shoulders. It was the kind of thing that

Tom was a sucker for. I knew I had to confront him now, make sure there really wasn't anything going on between them.

Later that night, I casually made my way to the forest. There's this spot in the forest, a little bit beyond the camp stations, where there's a collection of large boulders under a clearing in the trees. On moonless nights you can see the full expanse of the starry sky. After long days or hard days, I knew this was where Tom liked to de-stress.

As I walked through the trees, I took a deep breath, sucking in the moist, cool air of the darkened forest. The canopy was silent, the birds having all gone to their nests for the night, though the crickets were out in force. I walked over the dirt path, still damp from the evening rain. Everything felt cleansed, from the drops clinging from leaves to the moss on trees, freshly moist and spongy.

Tom was sitting on top of the boulders, arms around his knees, his hands clasped together. He was just staring up at the sky. The moon hadn't risen yet, so we were surrounded in complete darkness.

"Hey," I said, climbing up to the boulder to sit next to him.

"What's up." It was more of a statement than a question. He kept staring up at the sky.

I didn't say anything. Suddenly I realized I didn't really have much to say. I hadn't thought about what I was going to say to him. Then I thought, fuck it. "Tom..."

He looked down and over at me calmly.

I swallowed. "Long day?"

"Meh," he said, shrugging. He still didn't look away. "Not too bad. Just one of those days, you know? You just feel like you're one part of a much larger machine that doesn't ever stop. We still have a little over half of camp to go for the summer."

I looked up at the sky. It was filled to the brim with them, each twinkling, burning their own spot into space. It felt like if there were any more stars, they would have to start falling to Earth, spilling onto the ground like white-hot gems.

“What’s on your mind Ty?”

His voice broke my concentration on the stars. I closed my eyes in a grimace. “Tom, I have to ask you, because I was approached by someone else.” I looked down again, and saw Tom still looking at me. His expression was calm, and it was hard to read any emotion on his face, if there was any. “Are you doing it with the camper, Mitch.”

He smiled, and closed his eyes. Then he started laughing, and shook his head. “Dude, I thought you were going to say someone died or something. Or that you were going to confess you had a crush on me or something.” His laughter grew stronger.

I merely sat there. What was so funny about this? Was I missing something?

“I have not made any moves on Mitch, if that’s what you want to know.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Then I felt bad. I let Mitch make me question my brother. If there’s one person on this planet who I’ve grown to trust more than anyone else it’s Tom. I should have known that of course Tom was responsible.

“Why do you ask?”

I swallowed, nervous. I hoped that he wouldn’t ask. “Mitch approached me earlier today. He asked me if I was like you.”

Tom gave me a squinty smile, like he was confused or weirded out. “What did he mean by that?”

I sighed again. “He asked me if I was fun like you, and then he did this,” and I repeated the blowjob motion with my mouth.

Tom looked genuinely surprised. His mouth fell open in amazement, and he said nothing at first. “Fuck, man. I mean, I’ll admit, he’s not shy about changing down at the lake. He doesn’t bother using the stalls to change into his swim suit, but daaamn.”

“I’m sorry, I should have known you wouldn’t do that, but I just had to ask you, to be sure, once he implied that. And I wanted to go to you first, not anyone else.”

Tom wrapped an arm around me. “I know you’ve got my back bro.” We just sat there in silence, until eventually we got tired, and went to bed.

* * *

Shit hit the fan. I don’t mean literally. That would be gross. Which I guess is the point of the saying. It started out as a normal day; I got up about 5 am to start cooking breakfast by 5:30 to have it ready for staff by 6:30. It was a mostly clear day, sunny, and warm. After my stretch in the kitchen ended at 8:30 (I was off cleaning duty this week specifically), I went out to the lake and stretched out on the beach. The water was calm this morning, and the sunlight streamed through clear to the bottom. We were fortunate that the lake didn’t have that much aquatic plant life in it, so the water stayed crystal clear. Hanging out at the lake put me into a really good mood. I wasn’t even fazed when I passed by Mitch after lunch who grinned at me (though was it really me he was grinning at?).

It wasn’t until that night actually that things got really awful. After wrapping up dinner, and getting my chance to eat, I went out looking for Tom. It had been a while since we hung out, as we were in the full swing of camp now, and didn’t have as much time to spend together. I first went out to the large boulder, but he wasn’t there. I tried the concession stand, but he wasn’t there either. I ran into Sam, but he hadn’t seen him since the beach had closed evening swim a

few minutes before. So finally I went down to the lake. He wasn't there either. Stumped, I sat down on the shore and stared out across the lake.

The clouds were partly obscuring the clouds, and it looked like more were on the way. These were thick, powerful clouds too. It seemed like an overnight storm was on its way. The gust had picked up some, and you could see the ripples on the lake, muddying the reflection of the cliffs. The moon was sticking out from a gap in the clouds. It was nearly full, and lit up the scene like the sun, only colder. I got up, picked up a flat rock, and skipped it several times across the lake, before falling into the middle, sending ripples against the wind.

On the way up, I passed by the Lake shed, maybe Tom was recollecting or organizing the lake gear. He usually was the only one who cared enough to do it. Instead, I heard some muffled sounds, like someone was stretching for something slightly out of reach, which was weird, as the shed really wasn't that big. I opened the door, and froze.

On the floor were Tom and Mitch. To my even greater surprise, Tom was on all fours in front of Mitch, who had both hands on Tom's waist as he was thrusting into him. The worst of it all was seeing Tom's expression of sheer pleasure in the half-second before he registered what was going on. Then my eyes flicked up to Mitch whose thrusting had virtually stopped, and wore a shocked expression on his face like a mask.

This exchange took all of about a second, immediately after which I turned and slammed the door behind me. I walked down to the edge of the lake, not calming my pace until I couldn't walk any farther without getting wet. Emotions and thoughts roiled and crashed inside my head, threatening to blow out my ears and eyes: anywhere that might alleviate pressure. I wasn't sure what to try to process first: the image of Tom, my brother, actually bent over in front of Mitch,

the expression on each of their faces before they registered I was there, or the fact that they would try to get away with it in the Lake shed of all places.

I didn't notice that my arms were crossed painfully tight until I noticed Tom's hand on my left shoulder. I didn't look back at him. I couldn't bear to look him in the eye. I couldn't stand to say anything. I just kept looking out across the lake. Finally when I heard other movement, I turned around and saw Mitch, shirtless, pulling up his pants and buttoning them. He looked at me, but didn't say anything. We stared at each other for maybe five seconds. "Go," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. "Get the fuck out of here."

He didn't need any more prompting. With a terrified glance, he sprinted away from the beach, his shirt in hand. I stood and watched him run until he was out of sight. Then I sighed and looked back out across the lake, barely able to glance at Tom as I did.

Tom came and stood next to me. "Tyler..."

I said nothing, opting to stare down at the ground instead.

"I'm sorry."

Of all the fucking things he could have said, nothing could have been more hurtful and frankly, insulting. Before I said anything, or figured out how I wanted to respond, he turned and walked away. I slowly walked over to a tree, near the shore, sat down and leaned against it, letting out a huge sigh. What the hell was I supposed to do now? What in God's fucking green Earth was I supposed to do now? As I sat there, the implications began to pour over me, threatening to engulf me and drown me in despair.

No gay Scouts. At least, not until next year, 2014. No gay employees. No employee – student sex. That I'm pretty sure was outright illegal. *Fuck!* What was I supposed to do now? If I didn't turn Tom in, I was also breaking the law. But also, Mitch was the one fucking Tom, which

meant it had to be consensual on Mitch's part, if it wasn't indeed Mitch who even initiated the sex. Maybe there was a technicality in there somewhere?

After several more hours of thoughts and confusion beating my skull sore, I decided I wasn't going to get anywhere that night. I needed advice from someone else.

* * *

The next morning, I was shaking so bad that I messed up several pots of oatmeal somehow, putting in too much water. My co-workers asked if I was ok, and suggested that perhaps I go take a break and calm down. Who could I go ask for help? Who might be discreet if I approached them? Sam probably would. Yeah, he would probably be a good friend.

After breakfast was over, I decided to try to go find him. I caught him on his way over to the Forestry station.

"Hey Sam, are you free this morning?"

"Actually I'm wrapping up a Merit Badge class this morning. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. It's fine. I just had something I wanted to talk to you about."

He looked nervous, though I wasn't sure why. "I mean, I have a few minutes now, if you want to talk."

"Nah, it's pretty big, we should probably wait."

"Catch you after lunch? I'll be free then."

I nodded. We parted ways, and I took a deep breath. A few more hours of freedom. But then the pressure in my stomach would just return. I decided to take a walk around the lake, to hopefully clear my head. I still couldn't remove the image of my naked brother from my head. Fuck. I picked up a handful of pebbles, and started chucking them into the lake, as I continued to

walk around. Why the hell did he have to screw me over like this? I chucked a larger pebble particularly violently across the lake.

Finally it was time to get ready for lunch, and I went back to the kitchen. I had better control of my hands, but all I could think about was the pending meeting with Sam. How the hell was I going to tell him what I saw? I barely ate at my crispy chicken sandwich. I ended up throwing away most of my lunch untouched. We met outside the dining hall.

“Hey, what’s up?” He asked, his hands in his pants pockets. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Let’s go away from here,” I said, leading him to the mossy boulders. Now the silence of the forest felt oppressive and foreboding. “I saw something last night, and I need your advice on what to do.”

As we came up to the boulders, I saw him shift uncomfortably in his standing position.

I ignored it and pressed on. It was now or never. “I saw Tom and Mitch having sex in the Lake shed last night. Mitch was fucking Tom. And I don’t know what to do about it. Should I say something? Should I say nothing? Probably no one needs to know about it, but if anyone finds out, then I’ll be in trouble for saying nothing, and –”

“Tyler, calm down.” Sam grabbed my shoulders, and stayed there until I shut up and took a deep breath. Then he lowered his hands, and his face took on a guilty expression. “You don’t need to worry about that, because I saw it too.”

I felt every muscle in my body go slack. “What?”

“Yeah, I saw Tom and Mitch sneak away from camp last night, and curious as to what they were doing, I followed them to the Lake shed. Once I started hearing them, I immediately left. I didn’t want to be anywhere near there. I must have just missed you.”

I wasn't quite sure what to make of this news. On the one hand, I felt relieved that my secret wasn't a secret anymore, but I also felt uneasy that if Sam knew, that others might know as well.

“And, you don't need to worry about doing anything, because I've already done it.” He looked genuinely remorseful, and added, “I know he's your brother, but I had to tell the Camp Director. Having sex with a camper, Tom really should have known better. Just so you know, the Director might come looking for you to ask you about it, being twins and all.”

I looked at the ground. I felt my heart splintering into millions of shards. So that was it. The end of Tom's scouting career. Probably the end of his ever being near children again. I was certain he was going to have to register as a sex offender. My brother, and best friend. “Thanks for letting me know,” I said glumly, turning away. I hoped that Sam wouldn't try to stop me, but then I was also disappointed when he didn't.

The rest of the day, I just sat in my tent, staring into space. I told my co-workers that I wasn't feeling well, and probably shouldn't work in the kitchen for dinner. There had to be some fix for this. I knew how important that Eagle Scout was for Tom. It would crush him if he didn't get it.

Then Sam's prediction ended up being correct. Steven, the Camp Director, came by my tent after dinner. He asked me to come over to his office with him. I said nothing on the walk over, and he didn't seem surprised by that. Finally we entered his office, and I sat down across from him and his desk.

“Tyler, I'm bringing you in here for an extremely sensitive reason. I have reason to think you might know about a situation that arose here at camp, and I want to know what you know.

Earlier today, another staff member brought accusations against your twin brother, Tom, for having sex with one of the campers here. Are you aware of this accusation?"

I took a deep breath. I looked Steven in the eye, watching his clean-shaven face with his wire-frame glasses very closely. "Actually Steven, your witness got it wrong. It was an understandable mistake since Tom and I are identical, but he actually saw me having sex with the camper in question, and I will take full responsibility for my actions."

* * *

The next few days passed by in a blur. I was instantly fired, and my parents were immediately contacted, and instructed to come pick me up. I remember running into Sam who asked me what the hell I was doing, and I had no answer to give to him. After all, one of the best parts of being a twin is switching places. But I couldn't really say that, could I? It would probably come out in really poor taste anyway.

The worst was having to run into Tom. I had avoided him for the rest of the day, but word got back to him eventually that his name was cleared, and his twin was fired.

"What the fucking hell do you think you're doing, you ... you little ass?"

I was finishing up packing my suitcase, when he came storming into my tent. I looked up at him, which was a lot easier to do now, now that it was done. "I'm saving your sorry ass," I told him. The time was past for kindness or sorrow. What was done was done, and I wasn't going to let anyone change that. Not even my own brother.

He froze. He truly had no response to that. "Wow. I really fucked up, didn't I? What's going to happen to you?"

“I don’t know.” Honestly. I didn’t know. “They told me that in a few days we’ll be contacted by their lawyers and Mitch’s family and their lawyers as well. It’s unclear what the legal ramifications are of this whole situation.”

“No.” Tom just stood there, shaking his head at the ground. “No.” He said again. Then he looked up at me. “I’m not letting you do this. You’re going to come right now with me to Steven’s office, and we’re going to tell the truth.”

“Damn it Tom, don’t you get it?” I asked desperately? “This isn’t about me. It’s about you. You want that Eagle Scout. You need it. I don’t fucking care about the Scouts. I just came along for the camping and the friends. I don’t give one fuck about some dusty plaque on the wall. But I know you do. It’s not like we haven’t switched places before.”

He was still shaking his head. “I can’t let you do this. I really fucking can’t let you do this.”

“It’s my decision. Let me see it through.”

He said nothing. He just kept shaking his head.

The next day my dad arrived, and picked me up. We were silent the whole way home. I wanted to explain the truth to him, but either way he wouldn’t understand, and I just didn’t have the emotional capacity to talk about it. I tried to read the silence, but it was impossible to tell whether he was angry, disappointed, or simply waiting for me to make the first move. But it never came.

* * *

It was the middle of August, and a hot muggy, humid day. I was lounging in the shade with my sunglasses on reading a book, waiting for Tom to come home. A fly had decided to land

on my page, and I got distracted watching it crawl around, as if it were trying to read the page by touching each of the letters.

Suddenly I heard the SUV pull into the drive way, and quickly slammed the book shut and rushed over to the front of the house. There was Tom, pulling his pack out of the trunk.

“Tyler!” He shouted excitedly, dropping his stuff.

I ran over to him and hugged him tightly. Even though it was only about a month, it was the longest we had ever been apart from each other.

“I missed you,” – we said simultaneously.

I helped him get his stuff into the house, and then we went to the backyard, where we chilled at the edge of our pool, getting our feet wet.

“So how are you?” He asked me pretty quietly, his smile fading.

“I’m good,” I said brightly. “I’m really good.” He seemed very surprised, which pleased me.

“Tyler...”

“You don’t have to say anything. Especially since it’s all good now. Everything has been sorted out.”

“...what? I asked mom how everything was working out, but she insisted that I needed to hear it from you. That you wanted to tell me about it.”

I grinned. I couldn’t wait to tell him and see what his expression was. “Ok, so when I got home, I first got a call from Mitch. He wanted to know what the hell I was doing, and I explained that I was much less important and that the least he could fucking do, after he screwed you over was to let me pull this lie off. He agreed. He explained to me what happened that night, that he

had made the advances on you, seduced you, and that you weren't really down for it until the very end. He took full responsibility for the sexual advances."

This whole time, Tom was just nodding along with me. "Yeah, that part is true," he looked very apologetic as he said it, which helped vindicate my feelings of personal satisfaction.

"Yeah, anyway, as it turns out, there's nothing specifically illegal about a youth staffer having that kind of relation with a camper. It's totally against BSA policy, and is very much a civil violation able to go to court for the sexual misconduct of someone in a position of power. However, the catch is he was already over 18. He had turned 18 the second week we were there, and our birthday isn't until November, so we're still technically minors, making it statutory rape, especially since he was making the advances. So how it's all going to play out in the courts, I'm not sure, but I am personally, legally off the hook. I think."

Tom was now shaking his head at me, trying to stifle a smile. "You're kidding. You've got to be fucking kidding me."

I grinned. Seeing that smile again was cheering me up big time. "I'm not."

"You always were such a joker. How do I know you aren't just trying to cheer me up?"

He sat back and folded his arms.

I laughed. "But I'm so fucking serious this time. I swear."

Just a Good Scout

Noah stood at the window staring out at the dark, wintry night. Snow was falling fast and furious in the hollow florescent light from the lamp post. He was worried that the roads would be too slick with slush and ice to try to make it back home. It was a worrisome predicament, especially since he didn't even want to be here.

He had never asked to be here. This particular night he was looking out the window of his town's local LDS Church. It was the location that the regional Boy Scout district used to hold Eagle Scout Board of Reviews. Basically the group of three men, strangers whom he had never met before, presently deciding whether or not he would earn his Eagle Scout rank. Of course, he already knew the answer: no.

Noah thought about everything that had led him to this point: the adventure, the friendship, the kiss, wondering if he regretted any of it. He wasn't proud of much of it, he had made many mistakes and crossed several serious lines, but would he choose to do any of it differently if he could get a second chance? After all, he had never wanted his Eagle rank.

His older sister, Sarah, had been his role model. She had been the one to teach him how to kayak, had encouraged him to go rock climbing and rappelling for the first time, and even had volunteered to go sky diving if he agreed to join her. It was difficult for Noah to express just how much he loved his sister, usually crediting her with being the reason he could step into the unknown with unquestioning (and stupid) bravery. She had helped him achieve goals he was proud of, but then he had cried every night for two weeks after she went to college last year, and felt suitably embarrassed (or so he felt) after that.

As the snow outside thickened and became a thick, white sheet falling heavily and snugly over the houses and streets, he thought about Gabriel, who must be waiting anxiously by his fireplace for the Eagle rank verdict.

Noah had never wanted a boyfriend. But Gabriel, who refused to be called anything but Gabriel, stuck by him, no matter how hard Noah had tried to shake him. This amused him to no end. It's not that Gabriel was desperate... no, it was more like he was a bee that will keep coming back for honey, no matter how hard you try to swat it away. No. More like a fly that keeps coming back to decomposing beef. That seemed more appropriate.

Noah loved Gabriel more than almost anything in the world, even almost more than Sarah. Gabriel had been there to rescue him when his kayaked got stuck in a flip that had almost ended very badly. He had been there for him when Sarah had left for college. He was the one, even, who had convinced him they should come out for their Eagle rank reviews.

Suddenly a noise from back in the room startled Noah, and brought him back to the reality of excruciatingly waiting in the lobby for the inevitable decision. But it wasn't his committee emerging. It was the other Scout's, Jake or something like that. Jake was in a different troop in the district, but he recognized him from school. He was a flute player, or so Noah thought. It sounded familiar at least. He was kind of cute, and Noah wondered if there were any other flutes he played, perhaps more the kind you would find under the bedsheets. But he shook the thought from his head. He couldn't tell what the committee was saying to him, but the answer was evident by the grin that broke out on his face. It made him look like a cute young boy, not a near-legal adult, Noah thought. He turned away, but not before catching the thumbs up gesture from Jake at him, obviously signifying good luck.

Noah stared back out the window. The storm was rapidly slowing down, the snowfall already back to a gentle, if steady, stream from the sky. Jake's gesture stuck in his mind. It had been very similar to the first memory he had of Gabriel.

It had been a warm, sunny afternoon in late April. The Troop had decided to do a high ropes course, and he was getting harnessed into a zip line. He felt confident, proud even, as he could show off some of his experience with Sarah. He saw the guys down below, and just before he confidently soared down, he saw Gabriel, one of the new guys, grin and give a double thumbs up.

Later that night, around the dying embers of the campfire, after everyone else had gone to bed, they shared their first kiss. And it had kind of taken off from there. Embarrassed by the secret he was now keeping, he had never wanted a boyfriend, at least not from his first kiss.

Outside, the storm had come to a complete standstill. The snow, fresh and powdery, sat completely stiff, sparkling in the cold, harsh street light. There wasn't a puff of air, though the world looked tense, waiting for that single gust to come in and shake everything around, like the inside of a snow globe let loose.

Finally, Noah heard the other door open, turned, and crossed the room to greet his committee. His Scoutmaster emerged with them, looking very agitated.

"Hi Noah," the silvered hair man, who had sat in the middle said. He didn't look terribly excited. "I regret to have to tell you, that because you disclosed your sexual orientation with us, and that your orientation is at odds with the Scouting policy, we have decided to not grant you the rank of Eagle."

Noah's mouth was dry, but he managed to speak. "It's ok. I appreciate the consideration. I never really wanted to be an Eagle Scout, honestly. I didn't want to be the best. I just wanted to

be a good adventurer, a good friend, a good Scout.” He shook the man’s hand and walked away, feeling proud of himself.

Just a Good Scout, 2nd Revision

Noah stood at the window staring out at the dark, wintry night. Snow was falling fast and furious in the hollow florescent light from the lamp post. He was worried that the roads would be too slick with slush and ice to try to make it back home.

This particular night he was looking out the window of his town's local LDS Church. The room behind him was a large, empty room with an extraordinarily high ceiling. Christmas trees and sofas lined the walls. The windows where Noah was standing were next to the front door, on the opposite side from the offices where the Eagle Scout Board of Reviews were being held. Silent Night was playing off the speakers, and its melancholy tune echoed throughout the empty room.

His Board of Review, basically the group of three men - strangers - whom he had never met before, was presently deciding whether or not he would earn his Eagle Scout rank.

Noah tapped his fingers on the window-sill, adrenaline pumping through his body. He was a fourth generation Scout, soon to be Eagle, and the last thing he wanted to do was screw that up. He thought about his boyfriend, Gabriel, who he loved more than anyone else. Gabriel, whose troop was in a different district, was also reviewing for his Eagle Rank. Any moment now, Gabriel was going to text him. Noah felt his pulse quicken and keep pace with the thickening snow outside.

Noah's older sister, Sarah, had been his role model. She had been the one to teach him how to kayak, had encouraged him to go rock climbing and rappelling for the first time, and even had volunteered to go sky diving if he agreed to join her. She had helped him achieve goals he was proud of, but then he had cried every night for two weeks after she went to college last year, and felt suitably embarrassed (or so he felt) after that. But then Gabriel had picked up that role,

and always gotten him out of trouble, and sometimes in it. Gabriel had been there to rescue him when his kayaked got stuck in a flip that had almost ended very badly. He had been there for him when Sarah had left for college. He was the one, even, who had convinced him they should come out last month to their friends and family, before their Eagle rank reviews, though that itself was purely coincidental.

The snowfall outside intensified and became a thick, white sheet falling heavy and snug over the houses and streets. The wind howled and gusted violently, sweeping puffs of white mist across the windows.

Suddenly Noah's phone buzzed, and he snatched it from the window sill.

Dude, they said no.

Noah sighed. He wanted to cry in frustration.

They also said I should probably stay away from my Troop.

I'm so sorry Gabe, Noah texted back. He was the only one allowed to call him Gabe. *I know you worked really hard for that.* Part of Noah wanted to say he knew they shouldn't have come out quite yet, but that only made him feel worse.

Suddenly a door slammed across the room, and startled Noah, bringing him back to the excruciating wait. But it wasn't his committee emerging. It was the other Scout's, Jake. Jake was in a different troop in the district, but Noah recognized him from school. He was a flute player in the orchestra. At least, that sounded familiar. He couldn't tell what the committee was saying to him, but the answer was evident by the grin that broke out on his face. He turned away, but not before catching the thumbs up gesture from Jake.

Noah tried not to feel too bitter, and stared back out the window. The storm raged more violently than before. Noah wondered if he should refuse his acceptance of the rank. Fuck

tradition and family, he thought. But what would his father say? It would make Noah the first male in 4 generations in their family to not rise to the top of Scouting. His mind went back to Jake's gesture. It was very similar to the first memory he had of Gabriel.

It had been a warm, sunny afternoon in late April. The Troop had decided to do a high ropes course, and he was getting harnessed into a zip line. He felt confident, proud even, as he could show off some of his experience with Sarah. He saw the guys down below, and just before he confidently soared down, he saw Gabriel, one of the new guys, grin and give a double thumbs up.

Later that night, around the dying embers of the campfire, after everyone else had gone to bed, they shared their first kiss, and a promise neither would ever leave the other behind. Surely it was only a minute or so until his committee came out. He had answered their questions well enough, he felt confident if he wanted the Eagle Scout rank, he could accept it. Sure, Gabriel would say he was proud of him and maybe he would be. Eventually. But not before feeling betrayed, and left behind. The snow started letting up when Noah heard the other door open, turned, and crossed the room to greet his committee. His Scoutmaster emerged with them, looking very content.

"Hi Noah," the silvered hair man, who had sat in the middle said. He extended his hand, "I am excited to offer you the Eagle Rank. The three of us discussed it, and feel you answered all of our questions honestly and admirably. You felt very genuine and earnest when you spoke, which isn't something we always see.

Noah's mouth was dry, but he managed to speak. "You know, I appreciate those kind words, and the offer. But I've thought about it, and all these years, all I've tried to be is a good Scout. And I can't possibly accept this offer as a good scout, when I haven't been totally honest

with you. I have lied about my boyfriend, and I can't accept this offer, when he's been denied it himself.

As Noah stepped in the still, silent night, he felt the same pride he had felt showing off the experiences his sister had given him.

Appendices

Appendix A

Lavern Cox

I was super excited when I initially heard that Lavern Cox was coming to Redlands. Being a gender studies minor, and being abroad last fall when my friend had brought Gloria Steinem was on campus, I was still feeling pretty bitter. But when it came to her speech, and leaving that night, I felt conflicted. Here was this famous figure, a super inspiring model to many, especially those who do not conform to the gender binary or who identify as transgender. But I left that speech being surprisingly underwhelmed. Oh, her energy and passion and delivery could not have been stronger, filling me and many others in the audience with energy and hope. However, the more I thought about the words, the more I felt like I had heard them from school readings about oppression and privilege. Sure, her personal anecdotes of experiences were certainly moving, but again, not particularly different from other personal anecdotes I've either heard or read. Nothing about the speech felt particularly novel to me.

It got me thinking though, about what the role of writing is within giving a speech, say at a University. To some degree the writing needs to be good, otherwise you don't get an audience that feels like it connects with what you're saying. On the other hand, the best writing in the world delivered in a 3 hour monotone voice with no engagement by the audience will drive people away faster than you can blink. So perhaps the words aren't quite as important. As a writer, I want to rebel against this possibility, because I would naturally like to think what I have to say is the most significant contribution I can make in a speech, but a speech isn't a novel. You don't get to peruse the words at your leisure, you get the words the speaker is saying, and just as importantly, how they're saying them. All in all, I left the event satisfied, but strangely unmoved.

Appendix B

Little Shop of Horrors

What a bizarre experience. I hadn't really gone to any plays or musicals put on by the theater department at UoR before, but I had a friend who had got one of the lead roles, and so naturally went to support him. Somehow I had gotten assigned front row, getting my ticket the night of (opening night). I had heard a little bit about the play, such as there being some kind of man-eating plant, and so I was a little nervous about being so close to the action.

I was never touched. I turned out fine. But I did not expect the story that was given at all. Given the name, Little Shop of Horrors, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that the ending is an unhappy one, but I was not expecting the Shakespearean tragedy that ensued. My friend was one of the first few to be eaten by the plant. Slowly but surely the entire cast ended up being eaten. At first I was disappointed, as what I usually enjoy as a reader/audience member are bitter-sweet endings, not bitter ones. But then thinking about the message of the play: to beware of invasive species (and this can go down any number of metaphors), that greed unchecked does not end well, and the pressure to succeed can overpower common sense, the ending was inevitable, and I'm glad that it goes down the route of horror/tragedy.

Thinking about my own writing, endings are tricky for me. I tend to be the kind of writer that likes everything wrapped up in a bow. That bow doesn't have to be pretty. You don't have to like the bow at all – in fact it can be highly unpleasant, depressing, unsettling, etc. – but I like it to be there. I remember reading at one point, I think it might have been from Orson Scott Card, that he said that at the ending of a novel, the ending should be both surprising and inevitable simultaneously. I would expand that to this play, and comment I think it did it quite successfully.

Appendix C

Gillian Conoley

My last event of the year was going to see Gillian Conoley speak. At the event itself, listening to her speak, I'll admit I often had trouble following what exactly was being said in the poem or what I was supposed to be imagining, constructing the poems in my head as I heard them. They felt very... not abstract... but perhaps not quite fully grounded in concrete details. Though honestly, I forget some of the details of her work.

One thing that was bizarre that I thought about, going back to Lavern Cox and presentation, is when one student, Emmilea I think, asked about how she read the poems because of the spacing she had on the page. Having not been a part of the class that read her work, I had not realized there was possibly a funny way she could have chosen to read the poem aloud. I had kind of assumed everything was lined up along the left margin as she read. This is likely because her way of reading her work was not particularly dramatic, very different from Lavern's style of presentation.

The other thing I wanted to comment on from the reading was her comment about not having a regular routine for writing these days. That, if I remember correctly, she no longer feels the need to have. She made the distinction between being a poet and being a novelist, which I thought was interesting. I have always heard, time and time again, that writers should have a regular, routine time to write, so that they can get into a pattern and force their brain to take that in as part of its normal routine. I hadn't thought that this might be more important to some types of writers than others.