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Sleeping with the Answer

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 pissing 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 *pissing* 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. Afterall, 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.