

The Meteorites

FROM THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR

THE SUMMER I was eighteen, hardly more than a child myself, I found myself ministering to a mob of boys, age four to six, who ran like deer, cried like infants, fought like cats, and cursed like stevedores. My first day as their camp counselor was utter chaos, in part because the boys were all wearing their names pinned to their chests on fluttering paper, and the papers flew off in the brisk early summer wind, and the pins stuck the boys, and they stuck each other with the pins, etc. But things settled down over the next few days, and we became easy with each other, as easy as a coltish and dreamy teenage boy can be with a gaggle of boys mere months, in some cases, from toddlerhood.

There was David, who hardly spoke, and Daniel, who spoke for him and who wept when he soiled himself once, too frightened to tell me his pressing need. David told me about it, quietly, touching me on the shoulder, whispering *Counselor, Danny needs you*. Daniel, five years old, was the first child I ever wiped clean, and I believe now that when we stood together in a sweltering dirty toilet on a July morning many years ago, Daniel sobbing convulsively as I washed him with a moist cloth, that we were engaged in a gentle sacrament: Daniel learning that he must confess to be cleansed, me understanding dimly that my silence with this weeping child was the first wise word I had ever spoken.

There was Anthony, a tough even then; and there were his running mates, brothers who guarded their real names and went by Tom and Tim; and there was Lucius, a long lock of a boy, closed for repairs all that summer, unwilling to be touched, first to lash

out. There was Miguel, age four physically, age fourteen emotionally, who fell in love with the ethereally lovely teenage girl who ran the arts-and-crafts room. Miguel came to me one rainy morning and asked *Counselor, can you give me away?* I conducted negotiations, traded him, and saw him only occasionally the rest of the summer, usually trailing in the scented wake of his love, sucked along in her sweet eddy like a lifeboat trailing an exquisitely beautiful ocean liner. Although once, late in the afternoon, just as the buses were pulling away in pairs from the parking lot, I saw Miguel, alone, sitting in a front passenger seat, buckled in, hunched, sobbing; and for a moment, for all his eerie bravura, he was a baby again, frightened and bereft. I was not man enough myself then to go to him, and I drove away and left him in tears.

A sin: not my first, not my last.

There were Seth and Saul and Milton, who arrived together every morning in a large car driven by a silent man in a uniform, the boys spilling out of the car with gym bags intertwined like forest vines, the three of them inseparably tangled, yet apparently incapable of affection. They argued all day long in their shrill birdy voices, argued about balls and lanyards and swim trunks, about towels and mothers and thermos jugs, about sneakers and small gluey houses made of ice-cream sticks, argued all the way back to the elm tree where they waited late in the day for their driver, who never once opened his mouth, but drove up silently in the humming car, parked, emerged slowly from the front seat (unfolding himself in stages like an enormous jackknife), ushered the boys into the back seat (their thin sharp voices hammering away at each other like the jabs of featherweights), closed the back door (the camp air suddenly relieved of the shivered fragments of their tiny angers), plopped back into the front seat (the fat dark leather cushions exhaling sharply with a pneumatic hiss), and drove away (the long dark car dervishing the leaves of summer in its wake).

These then were the Meteorites, ten strong before we traded Miguel, nine strong on good days, that is to say the days when David's mother let him come to camp. She worried that he was autistic, which he was not, just quiet to the point of monastic silence, except when it came to jelly orgies, during which he howled as madly as his fellows as the jelly was cornered, slain, and

gobbled raw. None of the Meteorites ate anything but jelly, sopping, dripping, quivering plates of it, attacked swiftly with white plastic spoons, the spoons clicking metronomically against their teeth, the vast cacophonous lunchroom filled to bursting with small sweating children shrieking and gulping down jelly as fast as they could get the shrieks out and the jelly in. In my first days in the jelly maelstrom, I raged at the boys as loudly as they howled at me; but by the end of the summer, I had learned to sit quietly and watch the waves of sound crash on the gooey tables, slide halfway up the long windows, and slowly recede.

Although I was by title a camp counselor, there was no camp proper at the camp, which was actually a vast estate owned by the town and rented out in the summer to an organization that offered the summer day-camp experience to children from three counties for six different fee scales, the lowest just manageable for poor families and the highest enough to buy a car. The estate house itself was enormous, labyrinthine, falling apart, very nearly a castle in its huge architectural inexplicability. Its unkempt grounds sprawled for many acres of fields, forests, and glades. Beneath the honeycombed house ran a small-gauge railroad that the childless owner had built for his nieces and nephews; it consisted of three cars, each as big as a sofa, and an ingeniously laid track that slipped in and out of the house and hill like a sinuous animal. The cars and track were, of course, expressly forbidden to campers and counselors alike, and so, in the way of all things forbidden, they were mesmerizingly alluring and were filled every evening with counselors in various states of undress and inebriation.

But the counselors in the railroad cars at night were only a fraction of the counselors as a whole, for most of us drove off in the afternoon in the camp's buses, carting home our charges and returning them sticky and tired to their parents. The buses peeled away two by two, and when they were gone, the camp stood nearly silent in the long afternoon light, bereft of the bustling populace of the day except, here and there in the forest fringes or sunning by the pool, a few counselors in entangled pairs. Once that summer I persuaded a friend to take my bus route, and I stayed at camp until dark. I clambered up the stairs inside the house as far as I could go, and then climbed out onto a roof and sat for hours, high above the tops of the oaks and maples, watching. I remember

the long bars of slanting light, the sighing and snapping of the metal roof as it cooled from the roaring heat of the day, the soaring of a brown hawk over the farthest softball field, the burbling of three pigeons on a nearby roofline, the wriggles of marijuana smoke from the archery yard, the faint sounds of voices far below me, under the house, in the tunnels. When dusk came, I climbed down, leaving the roof to the pigeons. I could pick out the shapes of counselors against the hunched trees, some running, some walking arm in arm, the only lights in the thick grainy twilight the blazing ends of their cigarettes and joints, moving through the dark like meteorites. I found a friend and hitched a ride home.

The Meteorites and I were for the most part interested in the same things — games, balls, hawks, bones, food, trees, hats, buses, songs with snickered words about body functions, the girl who graced Miguel's dreams, and archery. They were absolutely *obsessed* with archery, although they could hardly handle even the tiniest bows, and even those bows mostly snapped emptily and whizzed over their ducking heads when they tried to draw back the strings, the arrows falling heavily to the ground without even a semblance of flight. When Meteorites ran away from the herd, which they did about once per week per boy, they could without fail be found in the archery alley, a broad grassy sward lined with stone walls and sheltered by sycamores whose fingers waved high above us and sent down shifting flitches of sunlight.

My great fear as counselor was that runaway boys would head either to the pool or through the woods to the highway, but they never did, not once. To the bows they went like arrows, and I would find them there a little later, watching the patient archery girl show them, for the hundredth time, how to grip the bow, how to notch the arrow to the string (the arrow shaking badly), how to pull the curve of the bow back to their sighting eye (their soprano grunts like the hoarse chuffing of pigeons as they hauled on the little bows with all the power they could muster), and how to loose the arrow with a flick of the fingers (a rain of bows in the air, a shower of arrows falling limply to the earth). At that point I would emerge from the sycamores and reclaim my lost Meteorite.

I don't remember that I ever scolded a runaway, for the archery girl was beautiful as well as gentle, and the archery lane a tranquil

island. Years later, when I read books about the Middle Ages in England and France, filled with castles and falconry and archery and knights and such, my mind reflexively set the action in that quiet green alley where bows flew and arrows lay facedown in the grass. For all the violence of the sharp arrows that did, on rare occasions, actually puncture the hay-stuffed targets, the archery lane was a wonderfully peaceful place, and my mind wanders back there even now, from the chaos and hubbub of my middle years.

The days of the Meteorites were circumscribed by geography. We were to be in certain places at certain times — the basketball court in the early morning (dew on the court, a toad or two), the arts-and-crafts room midmorning (Miguel's eyes riveted to the face of his beloved), the gym before lunch (the rubbery slam of dodgeballs against walls, the clatter of glasses flying to the floor when a small boy was hit full in the face), the softball field after lunch (languid, hot, song of cicadas), the pool (shimmering and cool and perfect) and archery lane in midafternoon, the basketball court again late in the day. I was nominally the basketball teacher, and so conducted ragged drills and motley scrimmages not only for the Meteorites, some of whom were barely bigger than the ball, but also for young Comets, Planets, and Asteroids (known to the rest of the camp as Hemorrhoids). I also coached the older boys, who came to the court in increasingly insolent waves, ending with my last class of the day, the Seniors, sneeringly fourteen and fifteen years old, some as tall and strong as their teacher, and one — only one, always one — determined to defeat his teacher in pitched combat.

That one was Andy, Randy Andy, sniggering scourge of the Senior Girls, artfully tousled black hair and pukka-shell necklace, quick fists and a switchblade carried for show. Andy stole a bus, stole money, groped girls, smoked dope, came to camp drunk, started a brushfire near the softball field, cursed the camp director, urinated on walls, crucified toads to trees, beat a smaller boy bloody, and, hours after he struck out near the end of a counselors-Seniors softball game, carefully smashed all sixteen of the camp's bats to splinters — sizes 24 (Pee Wee Reese model) through 42 (Richie Allen model).

I have sometimes imagined the dark poetry of that act, the camp

silent after hours, Andy emerging from his hiding place in the estate house, strolling down through the gathering dusk to the softball fields, dragging out the dusty canvas bat bag from the equipment shed, selecting the Pee Wee Reese model (you want to start small before working up to Dick Allen), taking a couple of practice cuts, selecting a young oak to absorb the blow in its belly, and then the sick *crump* of bat barrel against tree bone and the sudden green welt lashed oozing into the oak, and then a second swing and crack and shatter as the bat explodes. Andy drops the shaggy handle, shakes his hands to shuck the sting, and reaches for a 26: a Luis Aparicio. And through the thin woods the sound of vengeance echoes for almost an hour, until darkness.

Andy and I hated each other from the first minute we met, as he slouched against a tree and muttered a joke under his breath while I explained a basketball drill to the restless Seniors. I was only a few years older than he was, and nervous, so I got in his face, and from that instant — a windy late afternoon in July, our faces an inch apart, his blackheads marching from one temple to another, my finger poking too hard into the little bowl of skin at the base of his throat — we were relentless enemies. It is a mark of my own chalky insecurity and mulish youth that I hounded Andy every chance I got, reporting his crimes to the director, ragging him from the sidelines of softball games, and once, by incredible luck, catching his fist in midblow (he was about to punch another boy for the second time) and so mortifying him before a girl, the ultimate humiliation for him and for me too, then. And now.

So every day at three o'clock, when the Seniors slouched up to my court and ran my drills and then circled watchfully as Andy and I stripped off our shirts to play one-on-one, there was the entrancing shock of possible blood in the air, and once there *was* blood in the air, mine. Andy waited patiently for the right long rebound and the right angle of me chasing it headlong, and as I lunged for the ball, he lashed his elbow into my mouth as hard as he could. But I won, and his hate rose another notch. I remember the garlic taste of my rage in my throat, and the tight circle of boys around us, staring, the only sounds the sharp shuffle of sneakers on pavement and the relentless hammer of the ball.

Flirting with the female lifeguards was a nearly universal and daily habit among the hundreds of male creatures at the camp. It was

a rare male counselor who did not detour his charges past the pool on their way to anywhere else. Not even the camp director, an ebullient and brilliant con man named Buck, was immune. He arranged his office in such a way that his gaze naturally strolled out the open French doors of the house veranda and down a short flight of stone steps to the pool. He spun on his huge chair, his eyes on the bikinis in the middle distance, recruiting students *there is no camp on the entire North Shore that can offer the recreational and educational amenities we can*, charming parents *I understand that Marc has been named Camper of the Week three weeks running an unprecedented honor I may say and speaking of honor we would be honored to see you and Mr. Harrow at the annual Inner Circle dinner for special friends and benefactors*, chasing delinquent fees *I don't think you understand, Mrs. Kaplan, if we do not receive remuneration of your outstanding bill we will have to cancel Glen's pool privileges which will come as a terrible blow to the boy*, evading creditors *my accountant tells me that the check was delivered yesterday via registered mail*, arguing with his wife *you told the Kaufmans their twins could come free!?*, flirting with his wife *what say we knock off early and knock one off*, checking his toupee in the mirror *goddamned rugs*, writing camp advertisements *more than one hundred acres of fields and fun staffed by one hundred board-certified educators*, badgering food and gasoline and sports equipment and T-shirt vendors *yes, sixteen bats, various weights*, and placating angry parents *I can assure you Mrs. Steinberg that David's counselor was with him from the minute the accident occurred until his arrival at the oral surgeon's office, and that this young fellow, a Cornell University engineering major I might add, had foresightedly brought both of David's teeth with him in the ambulance*. At every possible opportunity, Buck sauntered down to the pool, ostensibly to check on the insurance, the floats, the filter, the schedule, but really to savor the lithe bodies of his female employees. Because the camp sat high on a windy hill not far from the ocean, it was cold in the morning, even in July and August, and the lifeguards wore their sweatsuits until noon or so. After a few weeks I noticed that Buck conducted all his business in the morning so that he could be at the pool in the afternoon, when the sweatsuits were off.

The geometric light of high summer, the smell of chlorine, the shouts of children in the shallow end, the cannonball geysers of older boys hurtling into the middle by the bobbined rope, the streaming hair of Senior girls emerging blinking from the deep

end, I remember it all now, my mind back in the itchy young cat-body I had then. I am bouncing down the stone steps toward the pool, peeling off my wet shirt, one eye on the shambling parade of Meteorites behind me *watch the steps gentlemen the steps*, the other eye staring at the shadow between the breasts of a girl in a bright yellow bikini fifty feet away. I take the last four steps in a casual easy bound and then lean easily into the pool, shorts and socks and sneakers and all, and as I go under I can hear the high-pitched voices of my boys rising in wild amazement: *Counselor went in with his sneakers on . . . !*

Of course I fell in love that summer, led there by the Meteorites. For weeks they watched me stare helplessly at one of the lifeguards, a shy lovely girl, and then one day they somehow conspired among themselves to bring her to me. They led her by the hand up the rickety stone steps of the castle, up the balustrade, down a sagging wooden hall lined with sagging metal lockers, to our locker room, lined with sagging benches. I was slumped in the corner, adjusting the bandanna I wore all that summer, waiting impatiently for the boys to change into their bathing trunks, their thin white slippery bodies like the startling white roots of plants just pulled from the ground. In walked Nancy, in her bathing suit. She was flanked by David and Daniel, who led her toward me by the hand, and then stepped back, Daniel giggling, David not.

I was very startled. There are few moments in life when you are idly dreaming about a book, a place, a meal, a girl, and you look up and there is your dream before you. Her hair was drying at the ends but still wet and tight to her head; one foot rested on the other as she leaned against a locker. Daniel was dancing about like an elf, quite proud of himself, but David was staring at me, waiting for something: a look I would not see again for twenty years, until one of my own children, at the same age, regarded me as soberly, with such powerful expectation.

Please sit down, here, sit here, move over Lucius, I say.

Lucius glares.

I'm so seepriised to see you here, I say.

The boys giggle at my tangled tongue.

The boys told me you liked me very much, she says.

My God.

And I like you, she says. *Very much.*

My God.

I, I've liked you for a long time, I say.

And with that we rose, as if rising simultaneously was what we had in mind, as if we had agreed on something. We collected the boys (Tim was hiding behind the locker naked), and we paraded the Meteorites down the rickety stairs and toward the pool. Somewhere on the stairs we held hands, and so began that summer love, doomed and perfect, having much to do with the taste of sun-burned skin, car radios, bitter words on lawns, letters on looseleaf paper, bright yellow notes on the driver's seat of my bus at dusk, her college boyfriend, her coy best friend, her mother's sharp eyes, the door of her room half-open, her shirt half-off, her face half-turned away.

The Meteorites are in their mid-twenties now, college graduates mostly, I would guess, and at work, married, in prison, who knows? I have thought about them every summer — summer brings me the Meteorites, ten strong always, Miguel still one of us — but I have never made the slightest effort to see them again. They would not remember me, and in their rangy men's bodies, long-boned, tending to first fat, I would not recognize the four- and five- and six-year-olds they were. Yet I think of them more every year. I have small children of my own now, and I am surrounded again by hubbub and jelly; and it is summer as I write, with the smell of hot afternoon on my shirt.

But there is more than memory here, more than nostalgia, more than a man's occasional yearning to be the quick boy he was. I learned about love, how to love, that summer — and not from the girl who came from the water, although I loved her and she me, for a time. No, I loved David because he loved Daniel; because David came to me that August morning and touched me on the shoulder and whispered *Counselor, Danny needs you*; because after I cleaned Daniel, in that filthy bathroom, David was waiting, his glasses askew, and when Daniel and I emerged into the clean sunshine, the boys embraced each other, their thin fluttering hands like birds on the bones of their shoulders.

Counselor, Danny needs you, spoken by a small boy on a high hill, and the four words fell from his mouth and were scattered by the four winds, years ago; but they have been a storm in me.