

Chapter 4

Impetigo and the Exploding Beans

Growing up poor has some benefits that many of us often overlook when recounting that period of life later on after we've survived it. One of the things I remember most was summers at Pretty Lake Camp in Mattawan, Michigan. God bless the people who think of the unfortunates of the world. Back then we were just called poor kids. Modern psychologists and sociologists have come up with a new term these days. Today, they call them "at risk kids."

Of course, poor or not, anyone hanging out in the immediate vicinity of my brother Terry at that time was always at risk, whether they knew it or not. Not that I'm trying to paint my brother as cruel or even overly hostile. He was actually pretty fun to be with, except when he wasn't fun to be with. He was tough and, though his nickname was Peanuts, no one that knew him ever took that to mean he was handing out candy to the neighborhood babies.

Nearly every year, my brother and I, and most of our neighborhood friends, would go down to the Boys Club and board the bus for a two-week summer program at Pretty Lake Camp. It was a beautiful place on a huge lake where city kids who didn't often get to go fishing or camping could spend the summer learning about life in the wilderness. This was considered preferable to roaming the neighborhood with nothing to do during the summer, and to use the old vernacular of the day, it kept us off the streets.

Here, we could learn to share the responsibilities of the camping and cottage life, while filling our days with canoe rides, swimming, nature hikes and evening campfire songs. I don't think "Kum Ba Ya" was popular back then, but I do remember quite a few rounds of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" being sung until eventually, being the nature of young boys, things would deteriorate to reciting popular poetry like, "*There once was a man from Nantucket . . .*" I, myself, was rather adept at poetry in those days and had a few gems of my own available at the drop of a hat. It was all good fun, and every young boy back then had an arsenal of "*There once was a man . . .*" or "*Confucius says . . .*" verses available for times like that.

Camp counselors were mostly volunteers chosen from the ranks of high school and college students who actually had experience in Scouting or just wanted to do something to help unfortunate urchins like myself during their summers off. I was not unaware of my own need for such assistance, having failed at my one attempt to be a Cub Scout when I was unable to successfully make a plant grow from a piece of coal and Blue Boy Starch. (A feat that I have to this day been unable to accomplish, which leads me now to believe they had actually ousted me for fear that Terry might be thinking about joining the troop.) He was a legend in his own time, as those who attended camp that year were soon to find out.

The two Osborne twins were kind of sissy-like to my brother and me and our friends. They had crew cuts, knock knees and rosy cheeks. On top of that, they actually wore Bermuda shorts when it wasn't even a camp requirement. In our neighborhood, that type of apparel could get you soaked with water balloons on any given day. We

wore jeans everywhere, except when we were going to church, at which time we wore jeans with a tie. We never wore Bermuda shorts.

The first week wasn't especially rough on the Osborne boys. I guess my friends and I didn't want to get things too riled up, since we enjoyed swimming as much the next guy. The occasional spoonful of flying oatmeal, or a coating of syrup on someone's tennis shoes to attract the ants, was enough to keep us occupied without endangering our summer at Pretty Lake Camp. If we went too far, they would call our parents and ship us home, which would be followed by a whipping and threats of being sent to Gull Road Juvenile Home; all pretty crummy in comparison to a couple weeks at camp with friends and no parents. So we managed to rein in some of our natural tendencies for bad behavior and get through the first week without a hitch.

I, myself, was laid up with a case of impetigo. Apparently, I had gotten it while on a nature trail by coming in contact with some poison ivy. The resulting condition was that I had developed blisters on my lips that soon turned to painful sores, making me look like I had tried to eat the fire ants that crawled from the Osborne's syrup-covered tennis shoes. I was in no condition to make any trouble, and my days were spent sitting in the cottage reading, or visiting the clinic in order to get my next salve treatment. There was not a whole lot I could do about it, so I took everything with a grain of salt.

More than a week of Boy Scout behavior was far too much to ask of my brother Terry. It was just a matter of time before he came head on with the knock-kneed Osborne twins as they were going to the lake for the daily free swim time. I guess when opportunity knocks, it's hard to resist. The brothers were coming down the hill while Terry was going back up and returning from the lake. Though the Osborne boys weren't dressed for swimming, Terry decided they needed to go anyway and threw them both in the lake, at which time it was discovered that they kept their asthma medicines in the pockets of their Bermuda shorts.

While all this was going on, I was at the clinic where the staff doctor, Hannibal Lecter, decided that he would hurry my treatment along by pulling the scabs off of my lips one by one using a pair of tweezers. Though the volunteer nurses obviously thought this was an unusual method for treating impetigo, nevertheless they offered no complaints, but rather stood there watching while chewing on their own hands and grimacing like Faye Wray at the first sight of King Kong. But poor Miss Wray had a day at the monkey cage compared to what I was going through that afternoon.

The reality of what was taking place caused me to experience my first wedgy as I sucked my Levis up around my chest. After about twenty minutes of excruciating sadism, Dr. Lecter then instructed his assistants to dab my lips with iodine, which took me to the ceiling of pain so that now every muscle and bone in my body tightened so much that I shrunk about four inches in size as my sphincter muscle wrapped itself tightly around my neck. I won't repeat the words that came forth that day, but had it been a Catholic camp, I would still be in the confessional seeking absolution.

Meanwhile, outside the clinic, counselors were running up the hill with the two Osborne twins, who were now experiencing severe asthma problems having been thrown into the cold lake by my brother Terry. When they realized their medicine was ruined, the whole thing was too much for them and they panicked, throwing themselves into a stress-related gasping fit at the thought of going another week without their

medicine. Once inside the clinic, the nurses were able to stabilize them with oxygen, allowing the counselors to return to the problem at hand: what to do about Terry.

It was decided that they would tie him to a big tree near the campsite for the rest of the day, and to add to his punishment, that night he would be tortured by watching the other campers cook hot dogs and marshmallows, while not getting any for himself; mild by today's standards granted, but I guess to the three hundred pound counselor who directed the nightly campfire cookout, missing a meal was akin to ten years in the electric chair. Terry however, being tougher than most, never blinked, and with the help of a couple of smuggled tube steaks handed to him by friends, he endured the whole thing as though it was part of camp fun, all the while planning his next move.

After the evening activities came to a halt and Terry was released from his captivity, we met with a few of our neighborhood buddies to make a plan. Since they wouldn't feed Terry tonight, we would make sure that none of them got to eat tomorrow night.

To add to the humiliation, my lips hurt so bad I was sure I would never be able to eat again, let alone ever kiss a girl. I would probably have to make a career out of posing for medical magazines as a photographic model of the devastation of severe impetigo. Like the ones in school I had just seen of a man with a rare cancer. They probably wouldn't even put my name there, just the words, "actual patient."

Later that night, we snuck out of our tents, broke into the food pantry, took as many hot dogs, chips, pops and canned goods as we could carry in our arms and hid them in the woods behind the camping area. We then went back to our tents and waited until we were sure everyone, including the counselors, was fast asleep. Around midnight, Terry and I roused our friends from their sleep and went to the woods to get our hidden booty.

First, we ate all the chips and drank the pops. Then, while we were sneaking out one by one to roast the hot dogs on the still-burning campfires, someone came up with the bright idea of putting all the canned goods in the fire and burning them up. Since we were already tired and now well-fed, we all agreed that it was a good plan and went from fire to fire laying the unopened cans of beans and soup on the burning coals. Then we went to bed.

The first can exploded in about ten minutes with a loud boom that shook the ground like a grenade had been dropped in the middle of the camp. The pandemonium that was set off by that first explosion could probably be heard for a mile in the quiet woods. The campers were sleeping in their tents, neatly tucked into sleeping bags, and as they all tried to unzip their bags and run for cover, they were knocking over tents and stumbling over each other in the dark trying to get their bearings. The overweight camp counselor slipped on a gooey mass that had found its way to his tent door and went crashing into a neighboring tent, squashing another counselor inside who had not yet managed to get his clothes on.

About that time, the next set of cans exploded like a series of meteors crashing to earth from outer space, sending hot soup and pork and beans splattering across the open yard like Campbell's mortar shells. By the time all seventy or eighty pounds of beans and soup had found their way out of those boiling hot cans, the entire camp, including all the campers, was covered with brown globs of beans and steaming

minestrone. Since Terry and I and our buddies were rolling on the ground laughing, they rightly accused us of the crime.

The next day, our parents were called and instructed to come and pick up their wayward boys who were more than they could handle at Pretty Lake Camp. The ride home with Mom was silent, except for my constant mumbling something about suing the camp doctor for the damage he had done to my lips and my life.

In the end, my impetigo was probably what saved us from a beating by Dad. The unusual treatment was so obviously mishandled by Dr. Frankenstein and his staff that Mom decided we were better off coming home anyway, so she covered for us to avoid any further problems with my Father.

Back at the Boys Club, we received the news that we were banned from attending Pretty Lake Camp for at least a year, and beyond that we were not welcome until we could give a good reason why they should ever let us come back. To my knowledge, we couldn't think of one and haven't gone there since.

We learned so much from the exploding soup cans that my brother and I started experimenting with building rockets from packs of match heads wrapped tightly in tin foil. That was fun until we caught the garage on fire and our potential as rocket scientists went down the drain.

I eventually got over my impetigo and actually did have quite a career of kissing until I married my current wife who only allows me to smooch with her and occasionally give a peck to my grandchildren. I still like both soup and beans, but have never cooked them on the campfire again without first opening them.

I heard the Osborne twins actually became dentists and now spend their summers working as volunteer counselors and cavity chasers at Pretty Lake Camp. They have matching Bermuda shorts with PLC embroidered on the front, and there is a stocked medicine cabinet full of asthma inhalers in case by some chance any of the Marlatt grandchildren happen to sneak in unnoticed for the summer camp program.

In spite of everything, we still managed to have good times back then. Pretty Lake Camp continues to this day and offers great programs for inner-city kids who might not otherwise be able to get away from the hustle and bustle of the oftentimes tough city life. Though it's fun to laugh about it now, it was great to be able to have a place like that to go to during our summers out of school.

Later in my own life, I developed a new appreciation for all the volunteers who had to put up with me back then. I had a summer job as a church youth leader. We had our own camp in Ocala, Florida, and I soon found out what it was like to be on the other side as the adult in charge of things. I've learned to appreciate all the hard work and genuine care volunteers at places like Pretty lake Camp selflessly provide for young people in tough situations.

As for the camp doctor. . . well, I've got John Walsh putting together a special edition of *America's Most Wanted*, and we hope to catch him soon. We'll eventually find him and bring him to justice, and then we'll see how his kisser works after I get done with him. Now where did I put those tweezers?