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THIS ONE TIME AT CAMP ...

And other misadventures in the woods

BY LAUREL MILLS



“DID I SEND YOU TO LESBIAN CAMP?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did I send you to lesbian camp?” my mother asks again, this time her voice raising a few notes as she enunciates the words. “Les-bi-an-ca-amp.”

“What’s lesbian camp?”

“How should I know what lesbian camp is?”

“Well, in fairness, you are the one asking the question,” I said.

“Your sister says that I sent you to a camp run by lesbians,” she said. “Overrun by lesbians’ actually.”

“The camp was run by a lesbian, Mom, but I wouldn’t worry too much. They didn’t recruit and it wasn’t part of the curriculum or anything. All of our faux Native American jewelry from arts and crafts was as straight as it could be.”

“I mean, I don’t mind lesbians,” my mother continued. “It just seems like I should have noticed

something like that in the brochure or when I dropped you off.”

“You are the same woman who thought her hairdresser’s male roommate was his actual roommate.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said. “So, I didn’t completely fail as a parent by not knowing enough not to send you off to lesbian camp?”

“No, you did not fail as a parent,” I said. “You did not accidentally send us to some sort of defiant, running-just-under-the-radar kind of horror camp.”

“Good, that’s all I really wanted to know,” she said. “And really, if you think about it, lesbian camp was probably a lot safer than sending my teenage daughters off to a co-ed camp deep in the woods.”

“There you go,” I said. “That sounds like a silver lining.”

By my mother’s definition, yes, I went to lesbian camp. I’ve also attended church camp, sports camp, questionable-admissions-standards camp and other camps that were a various combination of all of the above.

At the time, summer camp was freedom — a chance to get out from under the watchful eye of my parents and get away from home. I loved summer camp. In hindsight, my middle sister was much smarter. She refused to go to camp, so the year my youngest sister and I spent two weeks in Mentone, Alabama, she went to San Francisco with my parents. The pictures of her riding an elephant in an Alcatraz t-shirt still remind me of how stupid I was as a pre-teen/teenager. (It goes on a list with turning down Garth Brooks concert tickets for a party, not studying abroad because of a boy and a pixie haircut.)

Sports camp was my least favorite. I don’t like the heat, and I don’t really like sports, but playing soccer was my ticket out of gym class for the year, so I signed up. (Plus, all of my friends played, and there really wasn’t anyone to hang around after school with when they went to practice anyway.) This is how most of soccer camp went for me:

“It’s time for heading drills.”

“Are you sure that’s safe?”

“It’s perfectly safe. Now line up.”

“I’ve heard that heading drills can negatively affect your standardized test scores.”

“Well, the small number of drills we’re doing won’t hurt anyone.”

“Are you sure? Because I read that like even a small head injury can do bad things, and college admission is really important to me.”

The rest of the drill would go like this: “Oops, I can’t believe I missed that one.”

“Man, I can’t believe I missed again.”

“I really think I was close that time.”

“Well, I don’t want to hog your time. I hope I get it my next time through the line.”

Heading drills and suicides seemed like the best time for bathroom breaks, water runs and having the medic make sure some of my more troublesome moles weren’t actually melanoma.

Not surprisingly, at the end of the week, I earned twos out of fives (aka, “needs much improvement”) for most areas, including strength, agility, endurance and ball handling. As someone who took pride in earning all As at school and leaving summer camp with the honor camper banner, it was a tough blow. Then again, as someone who hates the heat and physical exertion, it was kind of a small price to pay ...

At church camp, I learned more dirty jokes than I have in all my years with access to premium cable channels and the Internet. My year at church camp also coincided with that time in my life when I realized that dating boys and kissing were things that my friends were doing — not just activities for the characters in the Baby-Sitter’s Club books.

“Hey, you.”

I continued to paddle around in group swim (a concept that, today, offends everything in me that prizes hygiene) contemplating whether or not I could do a handstand in my limited sphere of water

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without knocking a stranger upside the head.

"Hey, you. You in the green swimsuit."

I looked up.

"Is that your friend over there?" he asked, pointing to my best friend from home who had encouraged me to go to camp with her.

"Yeah," I said. "That's my friend."

"My friend thinks she's cute," he said, gesturing over his left shoulder to someone with a mullet.

"Do you think your friend would go out with him?"

"I'll ask," I said, having a pretty good idea of the answer.

My friend was not impressed by the mullet, and I had to pass on the news of rejection. But, it seems that her disappointed suitor wasn't too upset. The next day during group swim, he spent the entire hour making out with someone else.

I didn't ever have a camp boyfriend, but summer camp's infusion of boys that I hadn't known since kindergarten and wouldn't have to see at school that year filled with me with a kind of giddy excitement that bordered on nausea I still associate with being twelve. And, I also clearly remember the first slow dance when we didn't hold each at arm's length at another camp a few years later.

With all that I learned at camp, from the fact that freckles don't usually develop into skin cancer to Kim's wealth of knowledge (she had already had a semester of health class in Atlanta long before I knew what sex ed was), it was the summer after eighth grade that was the most illuminating.

My three bunk mates and I were gossiping in the dark when there was a knock on the door.

"Can we come in?" I heard a voice say as three older girls who shared our cabin but not our room stepped in.

"Sure," Stacey* said. "What's up?"

"We heard you guys talking and thought you might like to have some fun," Renee said. At 16, Renee was the oldest camper and a leader in many activities from C.I.T. training to sports competitions.

"What did you have in mind?" Stacey said.

"I thought y'all might like to try this," Renee said, and then she produced a prescription bottle and a hollowed out BIC pen.

"What is that?" I asked. Having little to no experience with drugs, to say that I was thoroughly confused would be quite the understatement.

"It's Ritalin, and we're going to snort it. Who

wants to go first?"

There was no temptation for me. No curiosity. I just felt like my life was an after school special in that moment, and it struck me as pathetic more so than anything else. (It was kind of like the first time a boy told me that if I really loved him, I would sleep with him. The cliché come to life just seems so sad.)

"Your turn," Renee said after all of my bunkmates tried the Ritalin.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm good."

"But you have to do it," she said. "We all did."

"I know," I said. "But, I'm good."

"No," Renee said. "You have to do it."

What Renee didn't realize is that I didn't have to do anything, and, in that moment, I absolutely knew that I didn't have to do anything. I also knew that I would feel much worse about myself if I caved in to her demands than if I just stuck my ground. "No thank you."

"If you tell on us, I swear to God"

"I'm not going to tell on you. But I'm not going to snort Ritalin either," I said.

Two days later, everyone who snorted Ritalin that night did get caught, but not because of anything I did or said. I kept my word, and I kept it a secret. The older girls who came into our room didn't realize their other bunkmate was awake as they were sneaking around, and she saw and heard everything. The older girls had to leave camp, and my bunkmates were placed on probation for the rest of the term. No one ever spoke to me about what I saw or didn't see or what I did or didn't do that night.

Now, everything about that night seems silly — from the clandestine meeting to the veiled threats — but this isn't about experimenting with drugs or following rules or teenage rebellion. What makes this a coming of age moment for me is that when I had a choice that night, the only voice I could hear was my own, and I did what I wanted to do. It's also that in the days afterwards, there was no praise for abstaining (again, I usually worked hardest for things like As on report cards and others' admiration), but I still remember being proud of myself. This incident is the first time I can remember knowing that what I did was right for me — without anyone else's interference or opinion.

"There isn't a child who hasn't gone out into the brave new world who eventually doesn't return to the old homestead carrying a bundle of dirty clothes."

~Art Buchwald



Summer camp was freedom from my parents, but it was also freedom to try and figure out some of those bits and pieces about who I was. Pieces that were easier to examine away from my hometown, my family and my school.

For some people, a moment of experimentation or testing the limits is their best choice. But, I don't think it ever has been for me. See, the thing is that I'm just a good girl. And, I'm not a good girl because that's what people expect of me. I'm not a good girl because I think there are rules that are going to get me into heaven. I'm a good girl because, for lack of better words, when all my genes and DNA came together that's just what happened. I don't like to hurt people's feelings. I prefer following the rules. And I want life to be fair. Even if no one else plays by the rules, I will.

And I think that's what coming of age is really about — the search for authenticity. It's when we stop imitating. When we stop mimicking others, parents, friends or celebrity idols, and put on our own skin. Whether that's a rule-follower, a rebel, a sports goddess, a mullet-lover or a woman who can't head a soccer ball to save her life with a tendency to over think even the most mundane matters, discovering that self and accepting it seem to be what those awkward adolescent years of fumbling around are all about.

Or, at least, I hope that's the truth. I have no other way to explain the pixie haircut.

**Names have been changed.*