

The Boatshed at Gibson Lake

By Eve Cantler, Washington, D.C.

The boatshed at Gibson Lake was not an ideal place to be having sex. It was small and cramped. The walls were covered with lifejackets that hadn't been fully dry in years and old canoe paddles with broken handles. The paddles rattled threateningly every time someone moved. The floor had probably never been swept and it showed in a thick layer of sand, dirt and dust. At some point someone had tried hanging some decorations, the remnants of which—a moldy life preserver and a stuffed cod—still hung from the ceiling. All this, paired with the strong smell of old lake water that had seeped into the wood over the years, made the boatshed at Gibson Lake the antithesis of sex. But since it was the farthest building from the center of camp and the cabins where campers were sleeping, it offered a degree of privacy that was unusual in a place where nothing was soundproof and everything was communal. It was for this reason that Bobbie and Jane now found themselves rolling around on the filthy floor of the dilapidated boatshed trying to master the simultaneous orgasm.

Seven hours earlier, the night had started as nights off often did for Bobbie and Jane. At 5 o'clock on the dot, joined by Kate and Lily, they had piled into Kate's beat-up old Bug, which they affectionately called Geraldine, and rattled off down the road toward beer, cigarettes and a bite to eat. In their faded denim cutoffs, tattered earth-tone tees and worn-out Birkenstocks, they were dressed to the nines. After all, they were Senior Counselors now—camp royalty.

The four girls were very proud of themselves. While most of their friends had moved on with their lives, they'd successfully risen through the ranks and now held positions with debatable amounts of authority and high amounts of prestige. Just as they had once flocked around their hairy-legged, pimply-faced, teenage heroes, they now had swarms of sticky-fingered 8-year-olds begging to hold their hands and loudly declaring their admiration.

"We've truly made it," Jane said, with only a touch of irony, as they bounced back down the winding country road, provisions piled on Bobbie's and Lily's laps in the backseat. Bobbie was not thinking about kissing Jane. And Jane was not thinking about kissing Bobbie. And yet, Bobbie found herself noticing the way Jane methodically piled her long dark hair into the perfect messy bun. And Jane, feeling Bobbie's eyes on her, found herself taking her time to gather each strand of hair.

"Now we've made it," Kate laughed, pulling over onto the shoulder and letting Geraldine rest her engine.

They had a special place they liked to go on nights off. They left Geraldine on the side of the road and Lily led the way through the woods to where the trees opened on a small clearing next to a little brook. As far as they could tell, they were the only ones who ever came here. Two summers ago, they'd built a firepit; last summer, they'd added a small shed to keep the wood they collected dry. Jane filled a bucket with water from the brook while Kate started on the fire. Lily peeled some birch bark off a fallen limb and Bobbie rolled a couple spliffs.

Their food was cold, but they didn't care as they sat around the fire, alternating bites of burger with hits from the spliff and sips of their beers. They cracked a couple jokes and told a few camper stories. Bobbie's camper, too scared to walk to the bathroom in the middle of the night and too nervous to wake up her counselors or cabinmates, had instead peed on her bunkmate's trunk. Bobbie had woken up to two crying campers and a puddle of pee. She'd had to scrub the trunk and floor with bleach and hadn't had time to shower all day.

"I jumped in the lake, though," she reassured them all.

They laughed, Jane's sounding a little too loudly above the others.

"And as we all know..." Lily started.

"The lake counts as a shower," they finished in unison, laughing at the Gibson Lake adage.

More stories, more laughter, more beer and more spliffs, until eventually Lily said what they'd all been waiting for: "Did you guys hear what Carol did?"

Carol was the camp director at Gibson Lake and had been for almost 20 years. She was unmarried, childless and lived in a tiny house on the edge of camp that always smelled like wet dog. Rumor had it the smell came from the ghost of Carol's old border collie who had drowned after being bitten by Georg, the camp's fabled snapping turtle. Carol was an object of obsession amongst campers and staff alike. She never forgot a face or a name. She was ruthless in her quest to run camp as efficiently as possible and unwavering in the passion she had for her job. It was the intensity with which she approached every interaction and activity that was both terrifying and awe-inspiring to all who crossed her path. Swapping the latest Carol gossip was a favorite pastime among the girls of Gibson Lake who feared and admired their mighty leader.

This time, Lily had the inside scoop. Jane shifted into a more comfortable position and tried not to notice that this readjustment also put her an inch closer to Bobbie. Kate

opened another beer with a satisfying hiss. Bobbie hit the spliff and passed it to Lily who took one final hit and rubbed the roach into the dirt.

“OK, so remember when Bug Juice grabbed those dinner rolls the other night? She just reached into the bowl and took one in each hand instead of using the tongs? And then she turned around and bumped right into Carol?”

Bug Juice was a 9-year-old camper who had earned her nickname the previous summer by drinking 10 cups of the camp’s mysterious juice medley in under five minutes and then immediately projectile vomiting on the circle of campers and staff that had formed to cheer her on. It was the stuff of Gibson Lake legends.

The incident Lily was referring to had only happened a few nights ago but there was a ritual when it came to telling Carol stories that had to be observed. They nodded their heads enthusiastically to show they remembered and that it was safe for her to continue. Bobbie let her head fall slightly to the left. She felt her whole body lean with it. She didn’t need to look to know that she and Jane were now only inches apart.

“And remember how Carol basically assaulted her and pulled the rolls out of her hands?” Lily paused to add another log to the fire. “And then Bug Juice bolted out the door and I had to go chase her down and comfort her?”

“What did Carol say to her exactly?” probed Kate, already laughing.

“How dare you—! In all my years, I never—! What do you think you’re—!” Jane did an excellent Carol impression, something that had garnered a great deal of admiration from other counselors. Bobbie watched as Jane wiped away a trickle of beer that was dripping down her chin. As they all laughed, Jane felt her shoulder brush against Bobbie’s.

“Bigger wars have been waged over those dinner rolls,” said Kate.

Dinner rolls were the crown jewel of the Gibson Lake dining hall. They were served only once a week and came out piping hot so that if you sliced one in half and stuck a pat of butter in the middle, it melted right away. When those dinner rolls hit the buffet line, all reason, all rules, all sense of civilization was lost. Friends became enemies, enemies became nemeses, and the kitchen staff became gods with the power to refill an empty bowl and make dreams come true.

“So, anyway,” Lily continued, “obviously Carol realized that it’s generally frowned upon to publicly shame 9-year-olds in front of the whole camp and snatch food out of their hands, so she called me and Bug Juice into her office the next day and apologized. But I guess Bug Juice wrote home about it anyway and her parents called Carol because she called me back in today and went ballistic. She said I was trying to turn campers against

her and that I was undermining her authority and she basically threatened my job and then made *me* apologize to *her*.”

“Wow,” said Kate, “Carol is so far off her rocker it’s insane.”

“I mean, she’ll definitely call me back in tomorrow to say sorry,” said Lily, “but still, can you believe that?”

“What do you think Carol’s problem is?” Bobbie asked, lighting a cigarette to help her process the absurdity of this latest outburst.

“I dunno, but she can’t fire you,” Jane said to Lily. “It’s her own fault that she yelled at a kid in front of the whole camp; she can’t put that on you,” she finished angrily.

“I think Carol just took too many drugs when she was younger,” mused Kate.

Carol had once gotten a little too drunk at the end of summer staff party and launched into a series of stories from her college days, many of which involved some form of drug use. The staff had clung to every word she’d said. When a seasoned counselor pulled you aside to tell you about “the night Carol let her hair down,” that was how you knew you’d crossed the threshold into camp adulthood.

“Remember the story about when she took acid and punched through that window?” said Lily.

“You can still see the scars,” said Bobbie admiringly.

They were completely awed by this 50-something-year-old woman who had watched them all grow up. This woman who could bring a child to tears without blinking an eye and then a minute later have the whole camp doubled over in fits of laughter. They tried with all their might to hate her but this strange sense of admiration always snaked its way into any conversation they had about her.

“The sun’s setting,” Kate said, drawing their attention away from Carol and redirecting it to their surroundings. As the sun sank behind the mountains, it cast the remnants of its rays onto their little clearing, changing the leaves of the ghost-like birches from lively green to pure gold. The whole clearing glowed and the girls silently observed the wealth that surrounded them. The trampled grass seemed to straighten itself, reaching up to ask the sun to drape it in finery for just a moment longer. As the last drop of gold vanished from the treetops, the girls grabbed each other’s hands and passed a squeeze around their circle, a Gibson tradition they held close to their hearts. Even though they were older now and there were only four of them, they still felt a strong sense of pride that the squeeze had made it all the way around without the circle being broken. As campers, it was rare that any of them could hold their neighbor’s hand the whole time

without dropping it for just a second to swat at a particularly pesky bug or scratch at a particularly pesky itch.

The girls began to break camp. Jane and Bobbie awkwardly untwined their fingers and stood up, avoiding eye contact as they each went about brushing dirt off themselves. Kate dumped water on the dying fire and stomped out the last of the embers still clinging desperately to life. Lily picked up the cigarette butts and the empty cans and the crumpled foil, stuffing it all into the takeout bag. They said goodbye to their clearing and trudged back through the woods to where Geraldine was patiently waiting for them.

Lily called shotgun. Bobbie pretended not to notice that the tip of her pinky finger was touching Jane's as their hands rested on the seat between them in back. Jane pretended not to notice Bobbie pretending. Neither of them could say when it had happened, but sitting around that fire, something between them had changed.

"Well?" said Kate, "Where to?"

They all laughed. There was only one place to go at 9 o'clock in a town that goes to bed at 6. They cranked the radio up all the way and sang along to the summer's top hits as Geraldine rattled along the familiar winding roads to Aunt Lorraine's, where cheap drinks, lonely townies and a broken jukebox awaited them.

Aunt Lorraine was a wan, grey-haired woman who appeared to be in her late 60s but was probably closer to 50. She was missing almost half her teeth and the ones she did have were yellowed from years of smoking. She had lost her only son in a car crash about 10 years ago when he was hit by a drunk driver. Above the cash register, surrounded by crumpled dollar bills and poorly exposed Polaroids, there hung a small, gold plaque commemorating him. She never checked IDs but was quick to confiscate a set of keys.

Lorraine greeted them in her usual way. "You all 21?" she asked gruffly as they ordered their first round of gin and tonics.

"Course we are, Lorraine," said Lily, sliding her dad's credit card across the counter. "You can put 'em on this."

A double gin and tonic at Aunt Lorraine's cost \$5 and was a big draw for the local camp staff, the luckiest of whom walked away with about fifteen hundred bucks for two and a half months' work. But as they all insisted time and again while sipping their g&t's out of plastic cups or topping off their beers from \$9 pitchers, they weren't in it for the money. Whether it was Gibson Lake or Moose Creek or one of the many other camps in the secluded Berkshire town, almost everyone who worked there was a lifer. Kids who'd

been roped into the cult life of the American summer camp when they were 8 or 9 or 10 and now happily sacrificed summer after summer to their home away from home for mere cents an hour.

Bobbie and Jane settled into a booth while Kate and Lily drifted over to some boys huddled near the jukebox. Kate and Lily shared a dream of marrying Moose Creek boys but were content for now just to sleep their way through the over-18 crowd. "Sampling the merchandise," they called it. Bobbie and Jane were thankful to have reached a place in their lives where they no longer had to pretend to dream of marrying men or "sampling" their "merchandise."

The past few years of college had been full of self-discovery. Bobbie had discovered herself the third night of freshman year in a hallmate's dorm room and had continued to discover herself with a large portion of the undergraduate population in the years since. Jane had held off almost a whole semester before calling her high school boyfriend to tell him it wasn't him; it was her. She was glad it was over the phone and not in person so he couldn't see the colorful hickeys she was using to broadcast her newfound queerness.

"I've always said Gibby's a breeding ground for lesbians," Kate had repeated for the millionth time to each of them when they'd separately come out to her the summer before last. Jane recalled the shocked expression on their counselor's face when 11-year-old Kate had announced this one night after someone suggested their cabin perform "Closer to Fine" at the upcoming campfire. When Bobbie told Lily, she'd rolled her eyes and said, "Duh." With Jane, Lily had had slightly more tact, opting for a simple hug and declaration of eternal friendship.

When Bobbie and Jane had told each other, they'd stayed up half the night sharing all the dirty details of their exciting new love lives and pointing out all the signs they should have picked up on. Bobbie pointed out that Jane had never kissed a Moose Creek boy—generally considered to be a rite of passage for Gibson girls—and Jane said she'd seen right through Bobbie's "girl crush" on their counselor their last camper summer. In all that talk, it never crossed their minds that they could one day find themselves locking lips in a booth at Aunt Lorraine's.

But as they sat there talking and drinking, they became increasingly aware of the inevitability of just such a kiss. Bobbie and Jane talked about a lot of things as they sat next to each other, sipping their liquid courage and pressing their knees together beneath the table. They went over the latest Carol incident again. They laughed about the time an 11-year-old Bobbie had peed her pants in the middle of the dining hall after she'd tried to run to the bathroom and Carol had made her sit back down and "walk calmly." They talked about how summer was halfway over, wondered whether they'd return to Gibson next year, and questioned the integrity of the latest Georg sighting.

The whole time they talked, their faces moved closer and closer together. And it was when Bobbie said, "It's crazy how far we've come," in reference to the distance between the pants-peeing, nose-picking kids they'd been and the gin-drinking, nose-picking pseudo-adults they'd become, that Jane decided enough was enough and kissed her.

"I'm sorry," said Jane, pulling away. "I just— "

"It's a bad idea," began Bobbie.

"Yeah."

But they were already three g&t's in and it seemed to them that it was enough simply to acknowledge it. And so, they continued to kiss in the booth. And in the backseat of Geraldine on the drive back to camp. And when they stumbled onto the gravel of the parking lot, they informed Kate and Lily that they were going to take a walk down to the waterfront. And so they wandered off down the treacherous, rocky, root-ridden path, in the dark of night, toward the boatshed.

It was expected by the time you were a senior camper at Gibson Lake that you could and would walk the paths at night without the aid of a flashlight. Knowing when to pick your feet up to avoid this root or that rock was essential camp knowledge. By the time you reached staff, flashlights were brought for the sole purpose of reading at night. A counselor caught out of bed with a flashlight was the laughingstock of the camp for an hour or two, until something else more exciting and equally as irrelevant to the real world happened. And so, despite their intoxication, Jane and Bobbie were able to make it to the boatshed without a single misstep and only a few saliva-swapping pauses.

"S--t!" Bobbie hissed as three or four canoe paddles came crashing down. She shifted onto her side, putting her weight on her elbow. Jane lay on her back, panting. They remained like that for a few minutes, Bobbie watching Jane as her breathing slowly returned to normal, and Jane watching Bobbie watch her. Finally, Bobbie stood up and started to put her clothes back on. Jane followed suit.

"Should we..." Bobbie trailed off.

"Talk about this?" Jane finished for her.

Bobbie nodded.

"Probably," Jane said.

But Bobbie didn't know what to say, so instead she pulled Jane toward her and kissed her again. Relieved, Jane kissed back, hard.

When Boobie finally got back to her cabin and crawled into bed, she checked her watch—1:43. She fluffed her pillow and pulled the covers up to her chin. She closed her eyes, feeling wide awake. A barrage of memories flickered past on the insides of her eyelids. Jane's hand on her shoulder after a game of capture the flag. A shared eye-roll across the table when their clumsy cabinmate spilled her cereal. The curve of Jane's back as she dove into the water to join Bobbie on the floating dock. Dragging Jane's sleeping bag onto the ballfield so they could stay warm while they watched a meteor shower. Bobbie wondered if Jane had always rubbed the back of her neck like that each time she twisted her hair up into a messy bun.

Two cabins over, Jane had her book open but the words were making no sense. After trying in vain for another minute, Jane shoved the book into the crack between the wall and her mattress, shut off her light and closed her eyes. She hadn't brushed her teeth and her mouth still tasted like Bobbie. She checked her watch. 2:05. She remembered how she and Bobbie had become friends. They'd found each other exploring an overgrown path and had decided to join forces. Holding back tree branches and helping each other over the larger fallen trunks, they'd managed to follow the path all the way to the lake, where it ended at the foot of a large flat rock. The rock jutted out about 2 feet into the water and the girls immediately deemed it their "Special Rock." Jane remembered sitting there once watching a spider spin her web between two large, green ferns. They'd been so enthralled they'd almost missed the lunch bell. Jane could still see each thread, shimmering in the late morning light.

Bobbie wondered what tonight meant. She wondered what the rest of summer held in store, wondered whether she and Jane were still just friends or if this was something more. Jane thought about the half of summer that was already behind them and how quickly the next half would go. She thought about all the summers they'd accumulated that now existed only in memories and a collection of lanyards, crumpled photos and interestingly shaped rocks at the bottom of her trunk. Eventually, they each fell asleep, neither quite knowing what she wanted tomorrow to bring.

Morning would come and it would not bring clarity. Days would turn into weeks and soon summer would be over. Before they knew it, Bobbie, Jane, Lily and Kate would find themselves standing in a circle holding hands, passing the last squeeze of summer, their final, meager paychecks sticking out of the back pockets of their now paint-stained, dirty, even more faded cutoffs. They would hug their tearful goodbyes and Bobbie and Jane would help Lily and Kate shove the last of their things into Geraldine's backseat. The tiny car would smell like dirty socks and happy memories. Bobbie and Jane would

watch as Kate and Lily drove off. Lily would wave from the passenger seat until they were out of sight.

And then Bobbie and Jane would be left alone. They would stand awkwardly, silently. Eventually one of them would crack, the pressure to break the silence overwhelming.

“I love you,” she would say.

“I love you, too,” the other would respond.

They would both feel relief but still no clarity. They wouldn't know what I love you meant anymore. They'd said it so many times before. But this would be different. One of them would check her watch.

“We'd better get going,” she'd say.

They would embrace one last time, holding each other tight as though they could stand together against the constant forward motion of time. But time would win and with a final kiss, they would part, turning away from each other. They would climb into their respective cars and drive off in opposite directions, wondering how far apart 500 miles really was. They would drive away from Gibson Lake, leaving Carol, each other and the boatshed behind.

But for now, they slept. Bobbie on her stomach, already halfway out of her blankets; Jane still on her back, covered fully. For now, Gibson Lake Camp for Girls held them in her arms, keeping the world at bay a few weeks longer.