

CAMP NOWHERE

by Kit Reed

Kit Reed has a new novel called *Enclave* that is just out in hard cover from Tor Books. Other novels include *The Baby Merchant* and *Thinner Than Thou*, which won an ALA Alex award. Kit's short stories have appeared in venues ranging from *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, and *Omni* to *The Yale Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Her short collections include *Thief of Lives*; *Dogs of Truth*; and *Weird Women*, *Wired Women*, which, along with the short novel *Little Sisters of the Apocalypse*, was a finalist for the Tiptree Prize. A Guggenheim fellow and the first American recipient of a five-year literary grant from the Abraham Woursell Foundation, she is Resident Writer at Wesleyan University. Armed with her usual sardonic wit, Kit takes a harrowing look at the steps one teenager is forced to take when family conflict leads to...

"It had to be an island, didn't it?" I stick it to Mom. "Like, no escape."

"Don't be negative, Chazz. This is our best vacation ever!"

"You always say that, and it never is." She has us trapped on a boat on some Great Lake in nether Minniesconsin, with no rescue in sight. I am marooned between nothing and nowhere, farther from the ocean than is safe.

Cool people don't come to places like this, not even on their way to someplace else. Landlocked even though we are floating, I am jammed into the heart of middle America like a slayer's stake. States that I don't even know the names of are crowding me like boulders and it's getting hard to breathe. I poke Mom, in case she isn't feeling guilty. "If I off myself, it's your fault."

"Don't be silly, it's beautiful!"

"It's fucking depressing."

"We're going to love it, you'll see."

"Yeah, right." This is nothing like L.A.

Mom's fingers bite my arm and I look where she is pointing. "This isn't for you," she says, and I'm like, *why are you whispering?* "This is for me and Dad."

I get it. Look at him at the rail, staring moodily at the view.

Then the island looms like a glacier that we're doomed to hit, and I groan.

My mom that I don't see much of except on these Quality Time forced marches tries to pick me up single-handed, using only her voice. She wants to put me down in that good place shrinks claim is right here inside our heads. "Oh Chazz, isn't it pretty?"

"Not really." But it is. Rustic cabins sit in the dirt like markers on a board game that I don't want to play. There's a cutesy log-cabin lodge with long porches, and every single deck chair is facing out to sea. Pine trees and shells line a beach that, although we are nowhere near the ocean, *looks* like sand. Trestle tables and a monstrous BBQ pit signal group activities, crap campfires with ghost stories and, yuk. Sing-alongs. Woodsy heaven, and it's sinister as hell.

“Look, Chazz. Tennis courts. This is going to be fun.”

At the Santa Monica Beach Club, at least you get to go home at the end. “Mom, it’s a camp!”

“This is different,” she says in that shaky soprano, like she has to sell herself as well as me.

“I hate camp.”

This is ominous. She goes, “Oh, sweetie, this is different.”

We are in yet another enclosed situation, the kind Mom books for our annual stab at family bonding. She and Dad are such big deals at work that they have to pencil in two weeks in some high ticket resort so we don’t get, like, alienated or some damn thing.

Platinum togetherness.

At home I play the top level on video games you don’t even know about, plus I can do anything I want. I eat whatever, whenever, and if Blanca says do my homework or go hook up with my friends, I just blow her off. She knows damn well I don’t have any, so I go, “Blanca, get over it,” and she grins. I do go out, just not like she wants.

I happen to work the dog parks, for, like, discretionary funds? Twilight is best. Little foofy dogs are easy, drop leftovers and they come right up to you. Then, WHAM. They’re in the bag. You have to wait until the dog parents give up going, “Mikey, Mikeeeee,” or whatever and leave. Then you sneak Foofy home. Some of the dogs I borrow are pissers but some are really cute. You can see how people get attached. What I do is keep their dog until I see them stapling up REWARD posters at the park. I wait another week. Then I turn up at their front door with Foofy and some story, and you have never seen people so glad. Never mind what I do with the money, it’s not the point, although I do give Blanca some of it because she knows. More to the point is the licking and the jumping and the blissed-out looks on these fools’ faces when I reunite them, the thanking and the hugging at the end, plus the begging me to stay in touch which I can not, repeat, *not* afford to do. I’m a hero, for a day at least. So, like, somebody notices. Besides Blanca, I mean. A blind asshole could see what’s going on with me. So, so what?

It’s not like I’d tell my shrink.

You wouldn’t think it’d be easy to hide a dog on the premises, but when the folks hit it bigtime and we moved uphill into the model home, Mom and Dad fixed up the pool house for me. They said I needed my own space. Like, they think I don’t know they put me out there so I won’t hear them fight? They don’t get that living in the pool house cuts both ways. I could hide a giant panda under my bed and they’d never know.

When I get back from these deliveries I hit the kitchen and pay off Blanca who, the minute she heard me going out, started to bake. We sit down with cappuccinos and hot brownies and she gets all weepy because she’s glad all over again because I got home safe, so it’s like a party every time. Where, in Camp Nowhere, can I possibly get that rush?

This is not immediately apparent.

Sign on the dock reads: No pets allowed, so that's out. Nobody in my demographic, as far as I can tell, which, given the nature of family vacation spots, is a little weird. So is the fact that Dad gloms on to the burly head counselor in her gray camp shirt with a seal on the pocket and, OMG, a lanyard with a *whistle*, talking her ear off like he'd rather talk to her than us. Also weird? Going uphill, we run into campers coming down with tears streaming. They stumble along with stretched faces like comedy/ tragedy masks and the bad part? I can't tell which, and—weird? Their group leaders are wearing *red* camp shirts.

"Mom." I poke her. "Mom?"

Her face does things I can't make sense of. After eight squeaks where her voice craps out she goes, "You ... You might ... *You might as well know, this is therapy camp.*"

"Why, Mom? There's nothing the matter with me. MOM, THERE'S..."

Her soft hand stops my mouth. "I know," she says, like we are both grownups. "Chazz, I know."

"Then why."

"Hush," she says. "Don't." Then she touches my arm softly, which is truly frightening. She's begging. "Trust me."

Our cabin is, like, out of some horror movie where kids get mauled, usually while having sex: it has wooden flaps that drop over the windows, Wal-mart maple furniture with flowered seats, rag rugs and candle-looking bulbs in fake elk-horn lamps and, up that staircase—you know, the one where creepy music starts because there's *Something Awful* at the top, crouched to spring?—upstairs in those bedrooms, *plaid bedspreads*.

I'd like to say things pick up at dinner down at the lodge, but our first nights in these places are always the worst, even though it's when they serve the best food you're gonna get. There's family-style bowls of Jell-O salad and corn bread in baskets on checkered tablecloths. We sit down on the Ferguson family island, Mom and Dad and me. She makes us join hands, even though Dad's mind is somewhere else, and she gives us this sad, hopeful smile. "Just us, just family. Aren't you glad?"

I think but do not say I am in no respect glad, because I am cornered in the area of No Escape. See, in a family resort you have to sit down at the same table with the same peeps every single night for two mortal weeks. Mom thinks that's the whole point. I think it's weird. Except for when Gramma comes and on Thanksgiving, we never do that at home, so when we do sit down, all we have in common is me.

My folks do talent management on Wilshire at Beverly, so dinner runs like a meeting, and on Mom's annual to-do list, the first item is always me. This is our pattern, and believe me, these vacations are patterned.

They'll use up the dinner hour grilling me, and in these places we have to sit here for the whole hour to prove to the people that we're having fun. Every "So, Chazz" question is loaded. They're all, *What is your problem?* never, *Happy much?* Whether I am happy is beside the point. High rollers expect trophy kids, so, my bad. By dessert they've run out of things to ask. I always promise to do better and we eat our pie. They finish their after-dinner decaf and we're done.

Food's okay, but one look at the personnel and I despair. Usually I can find somebody to hang out with: college kids who don't know I'm only in ninth grade, but these waitpeople are older than my folks. They're all pasty and dismal in gray camp shirts, and instead of smiling when they bring stuff to the table, they come at you like they're fixing to medicate you or throw you down and give CPR.

In spite of which, Mom twirls her hand with this fraud-y laugh, and for what? A bunch of mover and shaker moms like her, all waxed legs and flowered silk floaty things, matched up with aggressively ripped power dads in pastel jeans and polo shirts, totally the kind of people Gramma would say Measure Up, but it's like they all came here with an agenda, like Mom, plus a lot of them look too old to be here in spite of their ultra-white teeth and stretched, face-lifted grins.

There's only one bunch in the place that's having fun, lounging at the head table in red camp shirts that pretty much broadcast the fact that we are not all equal here.

Unlike the waitpeople, they have this I-love-this-life glow, like an ad for joy. They're laughing and talking like they couldn't possibly be related—weird, as this is supposed to be a family camp. Although isn't on Mom's agenda, I point. "Wait. Who are they?"

"Oh, them? Nobody." Mom's voice is all trilly: la-la, but her fingers bite down. *Don't you dare follow up.* "Just psychiatrists."

Right. Therapy camp. The only happy people here are the shrinks.

Then, oh the shame, everybody at each table has to get up and say who they are and why they're here. Mostly my eyes glaze over, people actually say gross things out loud, like "feelings of inadequacy," "sexual dysfunction," like they can't wait to yack up their souls. One by one they let it all hang out, while the shrinks at the head table grin and cheer them on. I keep my speech short: "Chazz Ferguson. They made me come." Mom's is sad: "I'm Jane Ferguson, and I'm here in hopes." Dad's is not what you would call straightforward, like, he won't meet our eyes. "I'm Lionel Ferguson. Let's solve the problem."

There's a ping pong tournament on the porch after, followed by the camp sing-along, because like Mom, we campers are on a schedule here. A bugler plays "Taps," just like in military school, which didn't work out for me.

Then, accidentally, the folks wake me up in the middle of the night. Too bad, since they were trying to sneak. I catch Mom fluffing her hair and hooking on light-up earrings while Dad stares in the mirror, trying like crazy to make a happy face. Holy crap, they're going out! Where they were all boring and obvious at dinner, now they're all edgy and festive, like tonight is their first date.

I'm thinking maybe their un-named problem is solved, but I can't say that. "So, what. Is this, like, a swingers' camp?"

Awesome. They both jump. "Don't be silly. It's the Late Show."

"And you have to sneak?"

Mom goes, "We're not sneaking. It's right here on the schedule. Now go back to bed." They're jiggling in the doorway, all shifty eyes and guilty grins.

I whine, "I wanna go," even though I don't.

"Sorry, it's not for kids. That's why they're having it so late." Then Mom says the wrong thing. "It's kind of X-rated."

And I do.

Mom fades out the door singing, "Don't think we're neglecting you. Look under the bed in our room, sweetie. We got you a Wii."

Does she not know I already have two? But I am thinking a lot of things, starting with that I just got *carte blanche* to go through their stuff. Plus, no way am I facing nature before I know what's out there. Tomorrow I explore. When I go, I have to go armed.

I toss their dressers and find about what you would expect. Camp gear from The Territory Ahead and Patagonia, store-folded with the pins still in. Underwear and cruise-type dinner clothes, not like they'll need them here. Self-help books on everything from getting it up (unopened) to getting ahead (dog-eared), but nothing about having fun. No, er. You know. Either one of them had their tubes tied, or else they aren't having sex. Comics, my dad reads comics! Comics and, oh, cool! Utility belt with knife and halogen flashlight. I hide it in my room.

I never heard them come in.

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Today my folks are all ragged and unsteady, like either they had their souls sandpapered last night or whatever they drank reamed their insides raw. Meanwhile the shrinks are laughing it up like the happiest people in the world.

Breakfast is just *weird*. At the lodge last night we were, like, on our own little island? Today people come up to our table, mumbling and smiling like Mom and Dad are runners-up in a contest I don't know about. Behind Mom's back some lady gives me a gooshy look. I could swear her mouth is going, oh, you poor thing. This creeps me out but without coffee, which Mom says is bad for my ADD, it's a mystery I'm not feeling strong enough to penetrate. At home Blanca serves it black with enough sugar to float my boat. Another reason I hate these trips.

Gross. We have group calisthenics, followed by swimming. Then, gack! People line up outside the shrinks' cabins like they're going to confession. A squinty woman in a red shirt tweets and eight couples peel off and follow her and a guy shrink up the hill. I'm like, "Mom?"

She's all, "Hush, honey. This is their *special time*."

For the rest of us? Schedule says: Downtime. No way am I going back to the cabin, Mom and Dad are in there. I guess they didn't solve their problem; I can hear them yelling from here.

Time to sneak up on the hill.

If you aren't used to nature it's creepy, crawling on stuff that you don't know *what* it is, but I need to find the trail to the X-rated Late Show. These woods creep me out. It's all the

leaves and rocks and junk on the ground, and you never know what's moving underneath, it could be lizards or giant beetles or, ewww. Snakes! I find a forked stick. It makes me feel braver, just not enough.

They've, like, defeated nature by hacking a clearing out of the jungle, so there is a gym-sized clearing at the top. Campers are sitting around a raised platform, poking each other and giggling like kids at a puppet show. The platform looks like the set for some awful play, with two chairs and a table, a rocker and a ratty sofa with a guy on it. The show must have been really awful, because this great big guy is curled up in the ratty cushions, squirming like a snail trying to worm its way back into the shell.

Like a sports announcer, the guy shrink blats, "And how does that make you feel?"

Then out of nowhere, wham! This humongous *grownup* on the stage breaks down on the sofa, thrashing and sobbing to break your heart while both psychiatrists bow to the crowd with humongous grins. And, wow. People stand up and cheer! I creep out of the bushes to watch.

"Good, good." The shrink is egging him on. "We want to feel your pain."

After a while the applause dies out, but the sobbing doesn't. The shrink has to hop onstage to uncurl his star from fetal position. Show's over and it's time to move out. His red shirt is pretty much drenched by the big guy sobbing into it as he hauls himself up, "No more, please, no more!"

The shrink just grins and thumps his patient's back the way a trainer works over his boxer, motivating him to fight another round.

Everybody goes, "It's good, it's all good," like it's the camp mantra and there's a prize for chanting, although I hear a couple of voices behind me going, "More!" If it's all good, why is he still crying to break your heart?

"Catharsis is the first step to recovery. That's it for today."

Everybody leaves except the vic, who stands there sobbing even though the shrink wants to move him out. "It's right to get in touch with your feelings, Bradley, but enough is enough. Let's do the rest of this in private."

"Nooooo!"

"Come on, Bradley. Come on, first therapy, then lunch..." The shrink starts backing downhill like a trainer holding up a biscuit to fool a dog. "All right then. You'll find me in the crying room. I'm only waiting 'til five."

So I'm alone at the top of nowhere with this lump of misery while lunchtime comes and goes. I creep up and poke his shoulder, like, *enough*. "You're gonna stop crying, right?"

He jumps. "Lady, lay off!"

"I'm not a..."

He turns and sees me. "Oh. You're a kid."

"Pretty much." In fact, in this place I never wanted, I am the one and only kid.

Now he is ugh-ugh-ing, trying to mute the sobs. "I thought you were that mean bitch."

I don't ask which one. "What the fuck happened?"

Ugh-ugh. "Psychodrama."

I know damn well what that is, but I play dumb. "What's that?"

"I really don't want to talk about it." Ugh-ugh. But I have unplugged him. He groans. "Okay, okay." Ugh-ugh. "They took me back."

"Back where?"

That does it. "B-b-b-b-back in time. They brought my baby brother home when I was *five years old* and I hated it, I hated them for getting one, and most of all I hated him. I hate him to this day. It was my *birthday* and they forgot, what kind of present is that?" Ugh-ugh. "But I thought I was over it until..." Ugh-ugh. "They made me go back there and feel guilty and terrible *all over again*."

If I can't stop him, he'll sob out his whole story. "That sucks."

"You have no idea." He is one big Greek tragedy mask. "My mom and dad lied to get me here. Now I'm their prisoner."

I am thinking, *Like me and Dad*. "Me too."

He doesn't exactly brighten, but he stops ugh-ugh-ing. "For all the good it'll do us. Do you want to hear my..."

"No!" I don't know what I want, exactly, but I'm starved. "Let's go eat."

"Frankly, I'm not ready to face..."

"No problem. I'll steal food."

By the time we get down there, everything is pretty much gone. We sit on the end of the dock gobbling apples and hot dog buns. Lame, but all I could find. We don't rightly talk, we stare out at the endless lake and we are both thinking the same thing. We aren't ready to talk about it yet. I don't even know if he's smart enough to make a plan, so that has to wait. I don't have a story and I sure as hell don't want to hear his, so instead I go, "If that's the early show, what's up with the late show?"

"Ugh." He uses Mom's exact words, except he is apologizing. "It's X-rated. Believe me, you don't want to know."

I do, but he doesn't want me to ask. "That sucks."

"Everything does." He sort of smiles, and once again we are on the same level. "Might as well go up there and get it over with."

I am too polite to ask what. "This whole place sucks."

“Damn straight.” He gets up groaning, because it’s time to face his folks, although he is entirely too old to have folks. I’m afraid to ask if he also has a wife. They’ll make him say the mental anguish was good for him, that it was great, getting his soul torn down to the axles and his guts spread all over the floor of the shop like engine parts, oooh, yes, you bet it was, wonderful, losing it up there in front of everyone. Yeah, right, you bet it was.

“If they want to feed on me, let them.” He throws me a look like a note tied to a rock. “It won’t be for long.”

So this Bradley Simpson and I aren’t exactly bonded, but if one of us figures out how to get off this rotten island, we’ll both go.

* * * *

The second Ferguson family dinner is exceptionally awful, and not just the food. I have no idea what we’re famous for, but tonight, since the folks peeled off for the post-lunch session on the hilltop, we’re stars. So many people buzz our table that Mom’s usual second-night supper conversation, in which we dish the other campers and pick some to hang out with, gets derailed before it leaves the station. We are stranded with zero talk, plus for reasons he won’t name, Dad is sulking. What’s up with that? Between flyovers, in which people drop in on their way to the buffet, she and Dad exchange loaded glances. They know something I don’t know, like what’s going down at tonight’s Late Show. Gulp. Are they, like, the Late Show stars?

So, fine. Tonight, I am prepared. After all, I know the way. Utility belt locked and loaded: flashlight, bug spray. Knife, in case, but in case of what?

In spite of the flashlight I get sort of lost, ergo-therefore, I come late to the feast. I don’t really want to know what happened before I arrived because those are my parents, Jane and Lionel Ferguson, up there on the stage.

A deaf person could track them by the sound. They aren’t exactly tearing out each other’s hearts up there and eating them, but the howling is fierce.

By the time I clear the bushes, it’s done. At least I think it is, but oh, holy crap! That’s *my mom* coming down off the stage, running flat-out; she is chasing my dad. They’re tear-stained and shaking and they look nothing like themselves. Dad gallops for the bushes where I am hiding and I’m like, oh shit. Where he’s usually all clipped and businesslike, my father is agonized and shaking, like something up there just laid him wide open and he hated what he saw, and Mom?

It’s hard to explain.

The shrink on duty is small and wiry, but looks strong enough to take on gorillas or elephants. She lunges for Dad and spins him around before he hits the bushes, which also means me.

He’s all like, “Nooooo.”

“Get back up there. *We’re not done.*” She twists his arm and muscles him toward the steps where Mom is waiting with campers clustering, all supportive and there-there. The shrink hustles Dad along, stoking him like a personal trainer. “Come on, Lionel, you can’t

quit now,” and, “not now, when you’re doing so well.

The rest of the, I guess it’s the camp encounter group, is chanting, “You can do it,” and, “Come on, come on”—well, everybody except poor Bradley Simpson, who’s gnawing his knuckles like a corn cob, agonizing because he’s been through it and he’s probably scared for Dad. I can’t swear to it but I think Bradley sees me. He raises his ring fingers, like it’s a sign. Light glints off somebody’s glasses and I see the bleachers set up in the underbrush behind the stage. I can’t make out who’s up there but I’m pretty sure they’re all in red, so what’s up with that?

The shrink on duty is all, “Seize the moment, Lionel.”

And from the bleachers I hear, “Gooooo!”

Dad flinches like he’s scared, and I’m scared for him too. What do they want from him? What are they getting from us?

The shrink grabs Mom and Dad by the wrists. “Now, you two get up there and give back as good as you got, Lionel. It’s your turn!”

Then she links Dad to Mom like a preacher and pushes them back up the steps and everybody cheers. I have to admit that for old people, like, they’ve got to be forty, my parents look pretty good up there. Dad gets his hair done in a place on Bedford Row and Mom goes to a spa and gets threads pulled tight under certain parts of her face. The outfits are perfect but they always are, no matter where my parents go. They stand there like a pair of life-sized lobby cards, and I don’t know whether to be proud or mortified.

Mom takes his hand, like, *well, honey?* and they exchange a loaded look. Then that bitch the shrink goes, “Shall we begin?”

I would rather forget most of what my parents just said to each other and did in the course of acting out their lives. It’s rubbing me raw and why do I think I hear the red shirts on the hidden bleachers making this, er, orgasmic “Ummmm.”

What’s amazing is that Mom and Dad get into it like a pair of old pros doing dinner theater at some crap club. Weird, how many people are getting off on this.

First they’re just kvetching at each other about the usual, it could be any old fight except doing it for an audience gives the performance an extra hype. Being watched gives them both some kind of edge. Even Dad is into it, waving his arms and making broad, show-offy faces, and grinning like a pro. The performances get bigger and bigger. My folks are dishing out the same old crap I hear from the pool house every night, but now that they are into it, they’re mugging like old troupers, because we are the audience and they are the show and I am glad as hell that nobody knows I’m here.

Spare me having to yack up the details. All you need to know is that, no surprise, Dad has been having an affair. The surprise is that where in our neighborhood affairs are a given, Mom let this one piss her off. Unless it’s that this time, Dad proposed. He wants to divorce us and marry Melanie, the script girl from the last *Batman*, who knew?

Once they have it out on the table, bloody and squirming, this Polly—the shrink gets down with them, like, “Call me Polly”—this Polly says, “Now, show us where it went wrong,” and they do.

They reenact highlights of their courtship. Their careers. The wedding. Their careers.

Me.

It all went wrong when Mom decided to have me, and this is the part I really don't want to talk about, so here's the short version, and don't make me spell it out for you.

In terms of who is the perp that destroyed their nice, happy, perfect little marriage, it turns out to be me.

These people that I look like, that *I thought I knew* start reenacting the messes I made in their beautiful, over-landscaped lives, although like film school and the MBAs they got from U.S.C. to enhance the presentation, I was totally planned. My ostensible parents are all Greek tragedy now, like I showed up specifically to wreck their lives.

So Jane and Lionel, what were you thinking?

That you could hang me on the wall or buy license plates and roll me into the garage and say, "There?"

This is awful.

I have to watch them up there pacing behind the sofa, which represents, like, my crib? They take on about it forever, re-enacting me messing up their lives, especially their, er, their fucking sex lives. This devolves into nonstop recriminations and fighting, wherein they play out every bad moment from my first day home up 'til Blanca came, after which they step away from each other, all bleached out and shaking, and take a little bow. I'm shaking too, but at least it's over. Yeah, right.

The wiry shrink hops up onstage and they go, "Helloooo, Blanca" and she pretend-wrings her hands in her apron like a maid, which Blanca would never do. Then pretend-Blanca picks up imaginary me in her arms and steps down, at which point my father and my mother that I thought might not like me but at least *cared* fall down on the sofa and re-enact themselves having steamy sex. Then Dad says, "It's not the same" and I bleed for Mom until she comes up with the punchline. "It hasn't been right since he came."

And this? This is what kills me. *They are getting off on this.*

If I wasn't safe behind this bush, I'd be dead by now.

Then I wish I was. Up front, pretend Blanca hisses in this insidious voice amped so it probably carries all the way down to the cabin where I believed they actually thought I was sleeping, "Well, Chazz, how does this make you feel?"

I can hear everybody in the hidden bleachers breathing in.

Every shred in me is shrinking, like I can fit my whole humiliated self back inside my testicles and roll away. Fat chance. The spotlight nails me right in the bushes and at that exact same moment, two camp staffers grab me from behind. Polly, the psychiatric axe murderer hits the path waving her hand mike, bringing me on like a gameshow host: "Chazz Ferguson, come on down!"

No way. I struggle but the light follows as the shrinks drag me toward the stage and if it wasn't for Bradley Simpson's fist bump as they haul me past where he is sitting, I would despair. Then I'm up, somewhere between Mom and Dad. Beyond the light that blinds me, the night is like a pit and as I whirl to escape the light I blink. At my back there are patches of red flashing behind trembling leaves.

The gray shirts make me face front. The head shrink pushes me to my knees. "Begin, Chazz."

The silence is awful. Everybody present is holding their breath.

"I said, begin!" I can't bear it much longer. Neither can she. "Now, Chazz. We want to feel your pain."

What I feel is the breeze stirring the bushes behind the platform, where unbeknownst to the audience those creepy, voracious rows of hidden shrinks are, like, licking their chops and going, in this low drone that cuts into me and splinters my backbone, shivering every nerve along the way, "We need to feel your pain."

* * * *

You've gotta hand it to Bradley Simpson, my new best friend. Who else would have thought of yanking the cable that killed the lights? Who knew where it was? I was exposed and blinded up there in the spotlight until he did it.

We are all equals now. Everything is darkness and yelling, with Dad falling over Mom and rolling in the dark and the shrink getting kicked off the platform accidentally—yay me, yay Maglite; she made a funny sound when she hit but nobody noticed because everybody was lunging here, there, as near to panic as it gets.

Everybody but Bradley Simpson, who moves really fast for a squashy guy that got too big for his clothes. "It's me," he says, but I know before he tells me, as he closes those fat fingers on my arms like an old friend. "We have to go!"

While from wherever she's lying the shrink is going, "Wait, Chazz, wait for the light," in that weedy, penetrating voice. "Stay where you are, and let the people feel your pain" and behind me the drone from the hidden bleachers escalates like an order, "We need to feel your pain," when I am beginning to get that they want to *eat* my pain.

It is a definite fuck that shit moment, but instead of letting the bitch have it, I let Bradley Simpson help me down off the platform and lead me away in the dark. We are silent as creeping ninjas, while behind us, I hear Mom and Dad going, "I told you it was a bad idea, Jane," and, "My bad, sweetheart, but if this works out and they let him stay here, we solve our problem for once and all!"

I am too scared and distracted to parse this because behind us, camp personnel are marshaling to, I guess, give chase, although they try to make it sound like wheedling, "Stand down, Chazz Ferguson, we're here to help you" and "Sing out, we want to help you," and, "Where are you, Charlie, baby. Chazz? Signify."

"This way." Bradley drags me off the path and pushes me down. We lie there trying not to breathe as the mob trots down the trail and feet go thudding by, shrinks and campers and coming up last, oh God, I recognize their ankles, my mother, followed by Dad. For a

long time we hear them crunching through the underbrush; we pick up the beams of flashlights going wild, the aftermath of the sweep going on below. We hear yelling, we hear threats and promises until finally they are out of sight and out of hearing, sweeping the lodge and turning out the cabins, I suppose. Then my awesome new friend Bradley goes, "There's always another way out. Let's go."

When it's safe to breathe I ask Bradley, "How did you know?"

"I didn't," he says, "but shrinks are all about escape routes, right?"

"What do they *want* with us?"

The way he says it makes me shudder. "You don't want to know."

We slide down the raw backside of the hill without stopping, crashing into bushes and hurting ourselves on rocks along the way. We run into trees and double back where we have to, until finally we hit the bottom and the woods end. We come out in a place where we don't see or hear the others any more. It's a deserted beach. We drop on an empty strip of sand and lie there panting, and for the moment, at least, I think we're safe.

When I can speak I say to Bradley, "You were nice to do this."

He says, like we are kids together, "Dude, it's no big."

"You didn't have to."

"Yeah, I did. You helped when I was down."

"It was nothing."

"Like nothing it was nothing. You listened. You got me lunch. Are you okay?"

"Sure," I tell him, "I'm always okay," but when I try to sit up I get all weird and shaky, like my insides are all red and rough, like Dad's. "What *was* that back there?"

"Psychodrama," Bradley says.

"I saw hidden bleachers."

"Observation platform." He snaps forward to ask, "You don't know what's really going on?"

Even though it's too dark for him to see, I shake my head.

Never mind. Bradley gets it. He always gets it. "They eat this stuff up."

"Who does?" I know the answer but I need to hear him say it.

"The shrinks. They feed on it. Literally." My friend Bradley is too upset to follow up. After a long time he says, "Your parents didn't tell you, did they?"

This is so definitely not a question that I say, "You saw them. They don't tell me shit."

It's so quiet that I think I can hear their voices rising from somewhere a long way off. You bet they're after us. Sooner or later they'll give up on the cabins and start sweeping the island. Unless we can figure out how to dig our way to China, it looks like no escape. I am trying to resign myself to the whole nine yards here, writing speeches to give on the big stage at tomorrow night's Late Show, figuring out whether Mom will actually expect me to apologize.

I say what you say, when you have to get through a bad thing without dying of it. "It's okay. It's only two weeks."

"Then they really didn't tell you," Bradley says.

But I'm trying not to hear. "Hell, I can stand on my head for two weeks."

"Not for you." This is how Bradley brings me down. "It was never just two weeks."

"What..."

"Two weeks from now everybody goes home. Except us."

"No way!"

"I told you. The shrinks get off on this. They keep people families wan to get rid of."

"Oh crap. Ohhhh, crap!"

"They call it directed rehabilitation. It doesn't matter what they call it, we stay," Bradley says, and that's all he says, except, "And the family gets rid of us, and the shrinks..."

"Oh, shit. And when they're done?"

"You ever heard of lemmings?"

This is too scary to think about. "They *what?*"

"You got it. Into the lake."

I do not say the obvious. I don't need to. My best friend that I never had before today is on his hands and knees now, digging up the beach like a dog going after a bone, clawing up gobs of sand and seaweed in those big, flat hands and throwing them behind him and digging up more like there really is China under there and it's only a matter of time.

Without knowing where this will end, I fall to and start digging too; what does he have buried here, food?

A bazooka that when they come out of the bushes or pounding along the sand and swoop down on us, shrinks, his wife, whoever, he'll blow them all away?

Whatever it is, I'm in. I'll go with it, right up to but not including wasting Mom and Dad. The folks may not like me, but they can't help it, and I can't say whose fault it is that I'm a pain and they are this desperate. Whatever it is, it won't be an issue any more.

As soon as I get back to the house I'm cleaning out their earthquake emergency box

that they don't think I know about, and getting Blanca. We'll start the backup car and drive to Albuquerque or someplace and she can take care of the apartment while I go to public school. We can make it on income from their slush fund, which I happen to know how to invest, another of those things they didn't want me learning about online. We'll be able to live our own lives someplace sunny, and Blanca's cool. Unlike the parents, I'll give her weekends, and she can take the car.

This is not as crazy as it sounds. By the time the thundering hordes come to this spot on the beach, the lakefront tide will have wiped away the hole we made, where Bradley pulled out the inflatable raft and the air pump that popped it into shape, after which he buried the pump so they wouldn't know. The raft is gonna be a tight fit but we'll make it, Bradley and me. He apologizes for us having to leave on short notice, as there wasn't time to steal food, but this is a crisis situation, so what are you gonna do? I'm not complaining.

Whatever's going on back there is worse than maybe starving for as long as it takes before we find land, and hey, Bradley's a certified grownup with a credit rating and all that this implies. Once we get to civilization, he has the power to rent and drive the getaway car, and from there? Does it matter, as long as we get away?

We don't talk. We don't need to. We waded out with the raft and when we get beyond the rocks I boost Bradley over the edge, helping him get on board, which, given how squashy he is, takes longer than it should. As soon as he can sit up without swamping the thing, he gives me a hand and I hop in. Then he picks up a paddle and I take the other paddle and I guess you would have to say we set sail.

By the time they hit the beach and the sounds of clamor and wild shouting come floating over the lake, we're so far out that they'll never know we were even there. Bradley and I are heading out, keeping our heads down, leaving behind the island and Camp Nowhere, with all the grief that this implies.

We don't have a plan, really, but right now we don't need one. It's enough to know that we've escaped.