

Big Beef Baked Alaska Banquet
Gary Gladstone 8/9/16 11:00 PM
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I'm ten years old and hate summer camp so much that my heart actually beats faster when I think that it's only three days until I finally go home. I've been a captive here for the month of August 1945 where I've collected enough bad memories to last a long time. I remember writing on blue-ruled paper and pressing extra hard with the pencil to add to the urgency of my requests. "Dear Mom and Dad. How are you? I am fine. Some boy got up and walked to the bathroom last night and got lost so he gave up and climbed into my bed by mistake. I was so tired I didn't get up. Then he wet the bed. I was wet and it smelled and I had to make the bed again today. The counselor said he was sleepwalking. It rained all week. I miss the food at home. Please, can I come home? I hate camp."

Nobody answers my letters except for an occasional folded clipping of my favorite Sunday comics puzzle feature, titled: "What's Wrong With This Picture?"

Two weeks ago I heard that people were actually dancing in Times Square, celebrating the end of World War II. For days, I try to imagine what would make people so happy that they'd decide to run into the street and start dancing. I am pleased to hear that the news means our boys will be coming home and meatless Tuesdays will end and maybe toys will be made out of metal again. But, I just can't imagine running into the streets to dance and kiss strangers, until today.

This morning, we are gathered around the flagpole for the assembly after breakfast. We're told that this afternoon, at two o'clock, we are all required to meet here, wearing a clean Camp Robin Hood T-shirt and to be on time. The announcements continue and we are reminded that Friday is the last full day of camp and parents will be visiting at noon and will join us for a banquet dinner of roast beef and the cook's special Baked Alaska ice cream dessert. There's an audible murmur from campers as we look at each other and smile. The boy next to me whispers, "The only reason why we're getting roast beef and ice cream is to make the parents think we eat good here." I grin and whisper back, "It sure beats you-know-what-on-a-shingle." I keep secret the fact that I actually like creamed chipped beef on toast which everybody calls "shit-on a shingle." I'm so excited about having roast beef and Baked Alaska and going home in three days that I think this would be the time I could start dancing and kissing anybody.

At two o'clock I am extra early and wearing my clean Robin Hood T-shirt. I see that there is a thirty-foot long, three-row bleacher bench. The photographer is setting up his camera which is making whirring sounds and moving on its axis. He nods at me. I ask, "What's the whirring noise?" He explains that this is a panoramic camera that requires twelve seconds to pan 120 degrees, creeping across the scene from one side to the other to capture the whole group in one image. I'm fascinated with this idea and instantly figure out a way to appear two times in the single photo.

As the campers and counselors assemble, seated on the ground and rising three more rows high, I sit on the very end of the row where the photo begins. The camera's motor buzzes loudly as it starts panning from my position and moves on to capture the other campers. I jump off the bench and crouching low, dash behind the posing campers to outrun the moving camera. At the other end, I snap into a pose just before the moving lens arrives. Smiling smugly, I feel like I'm the comic book superhero "The Flash." Then, the photographer asks for one more shot. A counselor says, "Gary, don't try that again. It makes everyone turn their heads." Years later, I'm sad to say that my amazing stunt was not in the chosen photo.

Midday Friday, I'm standing at attention with all the campers in a big semicircle around the flagpole. I can see many of the parents, gathered on the porch of the dining room. The smell of beef juices wafts through the air. The parents are waving at us and we are smiling and waving at them, probably for different reasons. I assume the parents are looking forward to reuniting with the kids. I'm smiling because I'm about to eat a yummy dinner for the first time in a month.

Barely able to remember the words, I mumble along as everybody sings "The Star Spangled Banner." When we are at "Whose broad stripes and bright stars..." I feel something crawling under my T-shirt. I pull the neckband away from my throat and look down at my bare stomach. I see a very large black wasp trying to make his way to

daylight. I tense up, frightened of being stung.

Because I don't want him to fly up into my face, I let the neckband snap closed, trapping the wasp. Then, realizing that now he can't escape, I slap myself on the stomach to crush the wasp under my shirt. I lift the bottom of the shirt and the big wasp plops at my feet. As we are singing, "O'er the land of the free ..." I see the wasp leap off the grass and fly in a straight line towards my mouth. He stings me on the lower lip and as everyone sings "...and the home of the brave," I scream "Yeeeeow" and dance in place from the pain. Almost instantly I cannot talk. My lower lip swells up to the size of a jumbo knockwurst. I can't close my mouth without biting on the swollen lip.

At the banquet, Mom and Dad remark about the delicious roast beef while I move my slice around the plate. The dining room chatter is spirited and cheerful and I'm silently miserable with a fat lip and sucking on an ice cube. With a flair, the kitchen staff swoops into the room with small plates of ice cream-covered cake topped with toasted meringue. I try to spoon it in over my swollen lip but since I'm afraid I'll bite myself, the cold sweet dessert slides, un-munched, down my throat and out the corners of my mouth onto my lap.

Driving towards home in the family Pontiac, Dad turns to me and says: "So, Gary, how did you like your summer at camp?" I mutter, through my swollen lip, "I dunno. I guess OK." Then after a long pause I ask, "Did you get my letters?" There's another long silence and Dad says, "Your lip seems to be looking better. When it feels good enough, let me know and we'll stop at the first Howard Johnson's and you can have as many hot dogs as you want and a double scoop chocolate soda.

Oh boy. I think I could run into the street right now and start dancing.

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