TWO

Ironwood was the last and best gift my father gave me. He was a civil engineer, which, from what little I remember of him, seems almost poetically apt: He was civil, courteous, not unkind. He smiled when I brought his coffee or a crayoned birthday card. He never raised a fist. I think he loved me.

But my hunch is that he was better at fatherhood's theory than its practice. He understood the basic blueprint, but when it came to the nit and grit of building life with a boy, he would just as soon have hired a contractor.

We lived in Silver Spring, Maryland, and he'd landed the best job of his life, consulting on the D.C. Metro system. They were laying the Red Line deep beneath the suburbs. The Bethesda stop, it was rumored, would boast the longest escalator in the free world.

Dad let me visit once; I was eight. He found the smallest hard hat on the rack, tightened the headband past its last hole, and with duct tape secured it at my size. We rode an open elevator down into the shaft, each clank of gears razzing my nerves. I had expected bright lights and thrumming drills, an underground circus of machinery. But it was an off day, and the bulldozers hulked in hibernation. The huge expanse swallowed sound. Even my own breathing disappeared. There was the livening, fresh-blood smell of dug earth, and a residual metallic tang of diesel.

When the call came three months later, at four in the after-

noon, I was home from school watching *Mighty Mouse*. In the kitchen my mother gasped, then banged her head against the wall. I knew there'd been an accident underground. When she confirmed it, saying my father hadn't felt any pain, that the toppling concrete killed him instantly, what I imagined was the quiet after the fall: my father, more asleep than dead, like those bulldozers I had seen, resting in the cool of upchurned soil.

The insurance money helped, but not enough. Mom took a job as secretary for a Pentagon lawyer. Then she enlisted, because the army would pay for schooling. Nights and weekends, she studied computer programming, earning a B.A. and a doubled salary. For her degree, she owed time to Uncle Sam. We moved from Maryland to Fort Dix, New Jersey. A stint in Ansbach, Germany, then stateside again to El Paso, Leavenworth . . .

I learned to pack my belongings in an afternoon. Waving good-bye grew as natural as shaking hands.

Regretting the instability of my upbringing, my mother sought a way to give me roots. Her first boss—the Pentagon lawyer—was the one who suggested summer camp. He had the perfect one in mind: Ironwood.

Ruff Peterson, the camp's founder, had been a buddy of his in the bad old days. They'd been early advisers in Vietnam, and then Ruff, disillusioned, quit in '66 and moved back to his family's Vermont farm. With windfall cash from selling untilled acreage, he bought some lakefront land near Killington.

Running a boys' camp had been Ruff's dream since his Dartmouth days. He started small, just him and two other counselors and a dozen boys in tents. Together they built the first cabin, then the next summer a barn-sized mess hall. Carpentry became part of the program, a lesson in hard work, self-reliance. Ironwood drew on the army's best themes—adventure, limit-pushing, camaraderie—but ditched the destructive elements. Ruff stressed respect, never denigration.

My mother decided it was worth a try. Fully supported now

on her own salary, she paid eight weeks' tuition with the last of Dad's insurance. It was the summer I turned eleven.

I'll never forget my first breath of Vermont. I'd flown to Boston, then boarded the camp-chartered bus: three drowsy hours gulping fake-pine air freshener. It was twilight when the coach huffed to a stop. We filed off, unloaded our trunks and duffels, still immersed in the bus's exhaust. Then a sweet, granite-tasting breeze diffused the diesel. I inhaled and immediately I belonged.

For almost two decades since, I've tried to pinpoint Vermont's secret summer blend. There's the smell of a thousand sugar maples burned in late-night fires, and a thousand more growing heavenward to replace them. There's the musk of skunks and nosy porcupines. But you can't single out the elements, or even put it down to just a smell, for in truth it's a synesthetic whole: the hullabaloo of spruce gum scraped off a tree and chewed; the azure sound of upbubbling springs; and the ever-present wake-up slap of green.

A day at Ironwood was a week was a lifetime. The counselors taught me to J-stroke a canoe in a headwind, how to tell time at night without a watch. We got purposely lost on the ridge top, then triangulated and found ourselves on the map. I built things: a woodshed, a dock. I poured concrete into Sono tube foundations for a bunkhouse that would stand for years.

In July we took a day trip to Deer's Leap and rappelled wildly down the sheer cliff. I had no fear. I was tethered to the granite monolith, and to a new sturdy bedrock of boys. Charlie, my just-made pal, harnessed up alongside me, and together, with impunity, we fell—the plunge a private tickle in our groins. That night, in our bunks, our heads nearly abutting, we made pledges we were sure we'd never break.

By summer's end, I could walk every trail with eyes closed, my bare feet trusting their new turf. I relaxed into the possibility of permanence. Shepherding me through it all was Ruff. Like his name he seemed at first abrasive, but when familiar, was a purr, a reassurance. Already past fifty, he retained a lank youthfulness

that suggested the inconsequence of time. His magnesium crew-cut drew all eyes in a crowd, an ever-glinting flashbulb, spreading light.

Ruff was tall (*is* tall) by any standard—six feet something and a half—but to a sapling of a boy like me he was redwoodlike. His hands were as broad as Michigan ax blades. He could carve a tent peg, or replace a rivet on a pair of boots (as he did for me, when I thought I'd ruined my first pair) with such deft and casual manliness that growing up—which since my dad's death had seemed a daunting, pointless task—once again became a rousing prospect. Ruff was what I aspired to: all that flesh, under control.

When we arm-wrestled, he didn't, like other counselors, let me win, and I liked the security of being pinned. And when at night, sitting bunkside, he cupped my hand in his, I felt like Adam, shaped from dust to man.

I had never cried leaving anywhere; I'd never cared enough about a place. But that August, when I stepped onto the return charter bus, I was a mess of tears and phlegm. Ruff said we'd send postcards, talk on the phone. But I knew it wouldn't be enough.

During the summer, homesickness had baffled me. Other kids grouched and begged to phone their parents, beset by longings I couldn't comprehend. But that dreary fall and winter—counting calendar pages at what passed for my home—I understood the burn to be somewhere you're not. I was campsick, miserably so.

And though it's sometimes embarrassing to explain, and draws puzzled looks in the "grown-up" world, that's more or less how I've felt ever since. What others adjudge "real life" is for me a postponement of what my heart says is righteously real: summer with a hundred boys in Vermont.

Thanks to Ruff's "campership" fund, I spent four seasons at Ironwood, then weathered the terrible aimless gap from fifteen to eighteen, when I qualified for apprentice counselor. The next summer, after my freshman year at Middlebury (a college I chose

for its Green Mountains location and its generous financial aid), I was hired as full counselor. Like a priest ministering his first Communion, at last I'd been released to my vocation.

The talent for camp counseling, like that for art or sport, can be coached but not truly taught. It's a gift: instinctual, absolute. Just as basketball greats have "eyes in the backs of their heads," the best counselors exert uncanny awareness—not peripheral sight so much as peripheral insight. I wondered if I had what it takes.

That first summer, Simon was the youngest boy in camp. He was in my Advanced Beginner swim class, but I couldn't, for the life of me, focus him. All he wanted was to writhe endlessly beneath the surface, a manic minnow, holding breath. He made us time him: forty seconds, fifty-five, a minute ten. Then he would burst forth, rigid and gasping, his sun-polished hair in his eyes. He could stay under longer than any other boy, but never did he stop to gloat or rest. He'd catch his breath, then down again he'd go.

Simon hardly spoke. Those lungs that exhibited such remarkable staying power could barely support a brief hello. But after a month of mornings in the lake—my hands on his hands, teaching strokes—Simon came eventually to trust me.

One day, as we toweled off after staying overtime so that Simon could attempt to break his record, I asked about the root of his obsession. Quietly he explained: If he trained himself to hold his breath for greater and greater spans, then, those evenings when his father came raging, and Simon hid underneath the bed, he'd stay noiseless long enough to go unfound.

On visiting day, Simon's parents arrived from Kennebunk at noon, but they couldn't find their son anywhere: not in his cabin, not the Lodge, not the road. When word came that the lake was the last place he'd been seen, a full-scale alert was raised. Ruff blasted the air horn to clear the waterfront. Rescue poles and a backboard were laid out. Counselors readied for a snorkel sweep.

I stood on the lakeshore, trying to calm the campers, but my mind was intractable with dread. How could I have condoned Simon's antics? I watched the boy's mother, hysterical with sobs; his father, fists holstered at his sides.

Of course. I ran, pulse galloping, to our cabin, and pulled Simon's trunk from underneath his bed. Nothing but dust mice and dirt. I did the same at all the other bunks. I searched on my hands and knees. No luck.

With a sore heart, I returned to Simon's bed, replaced his trunk. I was almost at the door when it came to me. I went back, hauled out the trunk and pried the lid. He was folded up in a human origami of fear, bloodless cheeks drawn, lips blue.

I lifted him onto the bed. Mouth-to-mouth worked in less than a minute. Simon coughed and then he cried in my arms. The next day I phoned a family social worker.

When Ruff retired three years ago, and the directorship went to Charlie instead of me, I briefly considered quitting. But only for a week, maybe two. Rejection couldn't keep me from the boys. I worked for *them,* I realized, not for Charlie.

I worked at Ironwood for a year more than a decade. I worked there every single year until now.