

PRINCES  
IN EXILE

A NOVEL

Mark Schreiber

Copyright 1983 and 2017 by Mark Schreiber

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

General Paperbacks edition published in 1990  
(Out of Print - rights reverted to Mark Schreiber)

First published in hardcover simultaneously in the United States and Canada in 1983 by Beaufort Books, Inc., New York, and General Publishing Co. Limited.

ISBN: 978-0-9976167-5-0

*to my parents*

## MONDAY

Cancer—it is in my head and thoughts and every moment of my day. It is in the woods and flowers and tall grass. It is in the lake and the dock and the shiny canoes. It contaminates the food, pollutes the unpolluted sky, darkens the tennis courts, creeps along the trails, enshrouds the mess hall and rec room and cabins. At night it will be in the venom of the bedbugs and mosquitoes. The crickets will sing it; the moon will light its features. Nothing can stop it—not the beauty of this place, not the doctors, not the laughter, not the play. I came here—I was allowed by my parents and doctor to come here; I was accepted here—to get away from it. I cannot get away from it.

I hear footsteps and glance up. Dr. Morland, a pediatric oncologist and the camp director, stands before me. He's a man of average height with thick black hair and dark eyes that look right at you when he speaks.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I answer, leaning against a tree across from the mess hall.

He smiles. “That's not allowed here.” He looks around. “Where is your bunk, Ryan?”

“They went back to the cabin.”

“Then I suggest you go there also. You'll be taking your swim test soon.”

I straighten up and salute. “Yes, sir!”

Dr. Morland grins. “That's not allowed here either. I prefer to be called Mike.” He pauses. “How was lunch?”

I make a face.

He laughs. Other than his piercing dark eyes, his features are not distinctive. Yet there is something about the man that impresses me. Even though there are lines in his forehead, he exudes a peace and wisdom rare for his age. Perhaps it's his sense of purpose.

"Good," he says. "I was worried you might be lacking the camp spirit." He gives me a slap on the shoulder and returns to the mess hall to deal with other matters. I shuffle patiently back to my cabin.

"Where have you been?" Rick, our counselor, asks when I open the door. He is taller than any of us and has a rough auburn beard, lighter than his hair. He looks to be in his late twenties. "Sit down," he says before I can answer.

The cabin is spartan, its only convenience being a single electrical outlet below the only window. There are four bunk beds for the campers. Rick and Jim, the counselor in training, have cots.

Everyone is sitting on his bed, so I climb up to mine. Below me sits Louis Sutton who, like my other bunk mates, I had never met until today. Like me, Louis is bald, but in almost every other way we are different. He is short and stocky, while I am tall and thin. His skin is dark, while mine is pale. His voice is deep and firm. Mine is higher and often betrays my shyness.

"We're trying to think of a bunk name," Rick tells me. "Any ideas?"

"A bunk name?"

"Yeah, you know, like the Tigers or the Warlords, something we can call ourselves. Haven't you been to summer camp before?"

I shake my head.

"Oh. Well see if you can think of something."

There is silence while everyone thinks. A bunk name doesn't mean very much to me and I consider this a waste of time. I could be reading now or playing tennis. But I wonder if that also wouldn't be a waste

of time. Nothing I do anymore seems truly worthwhile. I wonder what I am accomplishing.

“How about Vidal Sassoon’s Failures?” Louis suggests because he and I are bald. Everyone laughs but me. I think the joke is a bad one, even though Louis made it.

“A possibility,” Rick says, to my surprise taking it seriously. “But what would our emblem be?”

“A pair of scissors rising out of the water like *Jaws*,” someone says.

“I’ve got a name,” somebody else announces. He pauses for effect. “Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow!”

Even I smile at that one, despite my surprise at our condition being treated with such levity. There was a time, though, in the beginning, when I could laugh about cancer. Indeed, I greeted the diagnosis more with excitement than dread. I considered it a challenge and eagerly prepared to defend my fortress against the siege. But those memories are distant ones.

“Too long,” Rick says when the laughter has died. He is the only person in this room without cancer and the only one, beside myself, who seems uncomfortable with this type of humor. “How about something more concrete, like the Vikings or the Aliens?”

Some of the kids boo.

“All right, then what?”

There is silence again. “How about this?” Louis finally offers, “Princes in Exile.”

Some of the campers grunt in approval.

“It’s different,” Rick admits.

“And the emblem can show a prince standing outside his castle with the drawbridge up.”

“I like it,” someone says.

“It’s perfect,” Jim, the C.I.T., comments.

“Are we Princes in Exile?” Rick asks.

He is answered with a thunderous “Yes!”

“Then it’s done. Louis, since it was your idea you can be in charge of making the banner.”

“Great,” Louis says, delighted. “It’ll be the best banner in the camp.”

No one asks him what *Princes in Exile* means. We all know.

The sun is bright; the clouds are few and cumulous. The lake is blue and still. There is no breeze. The empty canoes lie in rows on the shore.

We are standing on the dock with our towels, awaiting our turn to be tested in swimming. I gaze at the pine trees that surround the lake and am amazed at nature’s profusion. I think of the thousands of trees that make just this one wood and cannot comprehend such abundance. Nor can I comprehend the proliferation of a cancer. The one gives us air and the other takes it away. I can no longer think of the first without also thinking of the second.

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you?” Robert Jones asks Louis. Robert has short brown hair and is tall and muscular and overflowing with energy. Nothing in his appearance betrays his condition.

“Yeah,” Louis answers. “How did you know? Were you here before too?”

Robert shakes his head. “No. I’ve been to summer camp twice, but that was when I wasn’t sick. But you fit in here like you’re familiar with the place. I mean, the way you came up with the bunk name and everything.”

“Well, I had a great time last year,” Louis says. “You can do things here you just can’t do back home. They don’t baby you. They let you have a good time.”

“That’s what I was hoping,” Robert tells him. “I don’t want a lot of supervision.”

“There’s no more than at any other camp. Probably even less.” He looks at him. “Why, what did you have planned?”

Louis and Robert are standing in front of me. I want to join the conversation but can’t think of anything clever to say.

“Nothing in particular,” Robert replies. “I just need to be free for a while. Go a little wild.” He looks at me. “I didn’t come here to read.”

I want to attack back, to demolish him with a witty retort. But nothing comes, so I resort to defending myself. “What’s wrong with reading?”

“Nothing,” Robert answers. “I read plenty in the hospital. But how often do you get a chance like this?” he asks, waving to the scenery. “To be out in the open, with your parents and your doctors miles away? You’ve got to take advantage of it, Rafferty.”

The line moves forward and Robert’s turn comes. He dives into the water and does not surface. Just as the instructor begins to get worried, Robert’s head bobs up outside the rope that marks the boundary of the swimming area, at least fifty feet away. The instructor blows his whistle and Robert quickly swims back, his strokes long and easy. I am not a bad swimmer, but I think Robert could beat me with one arm.

Louis jumps in next. I notice the droplets of water shimmering on his bald head and suddenly feel self-conscious. Reluctantly I step forward, dreading my turn.

I have some free time before supper, so I walk over to the medical station, which is equally distant from the mess hall and the rec room and is in the same building with the staff’s quarters. The medical facilities here are much different from those in a hospital, being located in a single room almost as small as our cabin, but the shelves and cabinets and refrigerator hold all the medicine we need. I think it is strange as I stand alone in the medical station the contrast between the hospital, with its loudspeakers and computers and long corridors, and this simple room, with its worn refrigerator and unimpressive microscope. I wonder whether the size and sophistication of big-city hospitals prevent as well as promote recovery, like alien worlds, confusing their occupants, turning them in worthless directions like crowded mazes. But I did not come here to contemplate the shortcomings of Western medicine.



I am about to go when Marlene enters. She is alone, which is ideal.

“Hi,” she says in a soft, friendly voice. “Is anything the matter?”

“No,” I answer, suddenly nervous, wondering what I could possibly accomplish here. Marlene is beautiful. Her face and body are exquisitely proportioned. Her skin is lightly tanned but stands out against her yellow shirt. Her hair is blond, long, wavy. Her eyes are as blue as the lake was this morning; her teeth are straight and white; her lips are made for smiling and golden words and kisses.

God! What is the matter with me? I look at her and my thoughts are purple prose from dime store novels. She is not perfect, and if I tried I could probably list a dozen flaws. She is not very tall, for one thing; her nose is long, and, as far as I know, her legs may be bony. Maybe she doesn't shave them. Maybe she has hemorrhoids. I have doubtless seen a hundred girls more beautiful.

I tell myself these things, and yet it doesn't matter. She *is* perfect. My Emma Bovary, my Manon Lescaut, my Lady of the Camellias. God, I can't help but think of her as the sublime but fated heroine in a novel by a French Romanticist. Realizations that perhaps she snores or picks her feet do not penetrate. Her beauty so overwhelmed me this morning that when she took my blood I didn't even feel the needle. That was the first time I saw her. She asked my name and I summoned the courage to ask how long she had been a nurse, in order to deduce her age. That was the extent of our conversation. I know her name because she wears it on her shirt.

“Is there something you want?” she asks.

I want to look at her, I want to talk to her, but I don't know why. I have tried, with some success, not to think about her today. But I just couldn't resist the temptation to see if she was here. I realize, though, that it's futile. She's twenty-three and probably dates neurosurgeons. I'm sixteen and bald and dying. Her skin will know the witherings of age. Mine won't.

“I’ve always been interested in medicine,” I tell her, which is true enough. “I thought maybe I could look around.”

“Sure,” she says, and proceeds to show me some of the different medicines, all of which I’m familiar with, either through personal experience or reading.

She points to the bottles, but I do not follow her fingers. I stare at her face and dream. And tell myself not to dream. And dream. I realize my attraction to her must be largely amorphous, for I can only explain the smallest part of it. Beyond that is an infatuation that pulls at my stomach like a roller coaster. Whether it emanates from invisible sources and stimulates senses science has yet to discover or comes from gestures and subtle expressions and nuances in her voice I do not know. Maybe it is a combination of these things; maybe it is more. I don’t really care. I just wish I could climb down from it, as from a roller coaster.

“Would you like to look through the microscope?” she asks after showing me the medicine.

“Sure. “ I have looked often enough through microscopes and what they show me has long since failed to capture my interest. But I don’t want to leave.

She puts in a slide and focuses, then steps back to let me look. I can feel her breath faintly on the back of my scalp.

“Have you ever looked through a microscope before?” she asks.

“Yes,” I reply. “I used to have one.”

“What do you think that is?”

“I don’t have to think,” I tell her in a moment of courage, quickly counting the white cells. “I know. It’s healthy blood.”

“Very good,” she says, smiling. “I’ll have to think of something harder next time.”

I smile back, proud that I impressed her. For a moment I have a glimmer of hope. I’ll impress her right and left. Maybe she’ll fall for a prodigy. But I quickly realize the hope is foolish. I can only be a kid to her.

The other nurse and the lab technician walk in, both older, nice, but unattractive women. I thank Marlene and hurry out.

Robert stops me on the walkway. "It's not med call now, is it?"

I shake my head. "Not till after supper."

"Then what are you doing in there? Ah, I know," he says before I can think of a lie. I notice he's looking past me.

I turn around and see Marlene. She waves.

"Not bad," he says. "I was beginning to think pretty nurses were only in the movies."

"I'm glad you think she's pretty too," I say with only slight embarrassment. "I was beginning to question my judgment."

"No, she's very pretty," Robert assures me. "And she likes you."

"Get off it," I say, now truly embarrassed. "I don't stand a chance with her."

"You don't know that. I'd go for her myself, except I like brunettes."

I laugh and we walk toward the mess hall. "She's seven years older than we are. She probably dates doctors."

"And maybe the doctors she dates are too busy to give her much attention. Maybe they make her feel inferior. Find out what her needs are. Maybe you can fill them better than some hotshot doctor."

"She could be married."

"Does she wear a ring?"

"No. But maybe she didn't want to bring it to camp."

"So ask her."

"I can't do that."

"If she were married, why would she leave her husband for three weeks to go to camp?"

"Maybe she's only staying one week."

Robert stops and puts his hands on my shoulders, his grip is firm. "Ask her!"

I think about what he's said and wonder if I couldn't fill her needs. I dream. And tell myself not to dream. And dream.

It's seven o'clock, time for the mosquitoes and lightning bugs. The sun is hidden behind the trees, but it is still very light.

We stand around the flagpole, singing "America the Beautiful" while the flag is lowered. Then lyric sheets are passed around and one of the women counselors, who has a good voice, leads us in the camp song:

Camp Hawkins  
we are part of you  
like the squirrels and raccoons,  
like the spiders and the trees.  
Here we are together.  
Here we can play all day  
and scare ourselves to sleep  
and call it fun.  
Here we are ourselves,  
and all the things we want to be,  
playing hard, learning, growing,  
becoming what we could not be.  
Here we are together,  
sharing times that last forever.

The first time we sing it soft and broken, but then we sing it again and this time it sounds much better. We are in central Kentucky, only an hour's drive from my home in Louisville. But, looking around, it seems like another world. Almost. I move my lips to the song, but that is the extent of my contribution. I am not a good singer.

Everyone claps and two of the bunks are told to gather wood for the campfire. The rest of us sit around in a huge circle and wait. There must be about one hundred kids in the camp. Our bunk, the fifteen and sixteen-year-olds, is the oldest. The youngest is eight.

I look for the fifteen and sixteen-year-old girls and find them almost directly across from us. It is still light enough to see clearly and I examine them somberly, like an astronomer scrutinizing new stars. Four are not attractive to me. That leaves four, or really three, since the prettiest belongs to Larry Harrison, one of my bunk mates. Larry told me this afternoon that they knew each other from Lexington and have been going together for two months. At first I thought he was bluffing, but then I saw them holding hands in the mess hall.

That leaves three, one of whom, a blonde, I have noticed before. The second girl is thin and has long straight dark hair. Beside her lie crutches, which means she probably has bone cancer. Unless, of course, she hurt her leg in an accident unrelated to her disease. The third girl also has dark hair, but hers is short. She is also wearing cut-offs and, as far as I can tell from this distance, has nice legs.

My eyes return to the second girl and I wonder if her leg is badly scarred or swollen. Then I wonder if I want it to be, for if she had flaws it might be easier for her to overlook mine. But in that case would I still be attracted to her? Why not? I tell myself she's pretty regardless of her leg. But when I see Marlene walking behind the circle the heavens change and she is the only star in my sky.

"Can I ask you a question, Rafferty?" The voice belongs to Robert, who is sitting next to me, and it brings me back to reality. The circle is clamorous from all the talking. In the middle, one of the counselors is lighting the fire.

I turn to Robert; this is the first time I have seen him look serious.

"What have you got?" he asks.

The question surprises me. Just as cellmates don't discuss their crimes, so the dying don't discuss their maladies. At least that's how it's been

with me. Perhaps Robert doesn't realize the seriousness—still, to be asked at a campfire, out of the blue, by someone I've only met today—I'm not sure how to react. But Robert's expression is one of such genuine interest and concern that I think it would be rude not to tell him.

"I have glioblastoma multiforme," I whisper.

His expression becomes sympathetic. "Brain tumor?"

I nod.

He frowns. "That's bad, isn't it?"

I nod again, looking away. "Yeah. It's bad."

"When was it diagnosed?"

"About a year ago," I tell him, hoping he won't ask me many more questions.

"I have acute lymphocytic leukemia," he says and looks at the campfire. I wait for more, but he remains silent. Apparently, that was all he needed to ask and say for now.

The counselors quiet us and Dr. Morland, the director, walks to the center to address us.

"Welcome to Camp Hawkins," he says enthusiastically, standing close to the fire. "Many of you I've met either today or before camp. Those of you I don't know I'll try to meet tomorrow so that I can learn your names and something about you. To those of you who were here last year, welcome back. You'll find a few improvements, like motorbikes and plenty of hot water in the showers, and I think you'll enjoy yourselves even more than you did last time. To those of you who have not been here before but have been to traditional summer camps, don't expect this one to be more restricted. We do everything they do and maybe a few things more. And those of you who are older will find that we give you plenty of room because we think you need that. This is a camp, not a cancer ward with trees. We're here to have fun, so

don't worry about head groups—the only shrinking done here will be in the laundry.”

The campers cheer. I smile, remembering the first time a psychiatrist came into my hospital room. He sat on a chair next to my bed and made notes on a clipboard. He asked me if I ever used visualization therapy and I told him yes, that I imagined my tumor was a fat psychiatrist and I smothered him with Rorschach tests. But the psychiatrist was unperturbed and continued with his questions, not even taking the hint when I mentioned sleep as one of my goals for the future. Then he finally left without telling me what he thought, and I believed at the time that he either hadn't learned anything and was afraid to admit so, or was selfish with his insight. Since then I have had better experiences with psychiatrists who were more open and understanding, but I don't think I have ever gotten over the anger and resentment that the first one caused me to feel. And, judging from the applause, I would guess that the others have had similar experiences.

“Now aside from our normal arts and crafts and dramatic activities,” the director continues, “we will have two long-term projects, long-term meaning that we will work on them throughout the session, not finishing or presenting them until late in the third week. One of these projects will be dramatic, and it can be anything, a musical or dance number, a comedy skit, a speech or scene from a play, just make it good and try to keep it under five minutes. The younger bunks will do these as bunks; the older bunks will do these in teams of two; however, your partner cannot be from the same cabin. If you can't find a partner by the end of the week let me know and I'll get someone.

“The second project is artistic and involves the whole camp. Each session builds a permanent sculpture to stand as a monument to the campers who built it. Yours will stand with the others, at the

entrance to the camp. I want each of you to contribute to its construction, even if that means just driving in one nail or painting a small plank. What you contribute is not as important as the fact that you do contribute, for this must be an effort of the entire camp. As for the design, that will be decided by a committee. Anyone who wants to be on the committee is welcome; there will be a sign-up sheet tomorrow at breakfast. The committee will meet briefly every day after lunch to propose ideas and will vote next Monday to choose the one you will build. Counselors and staff will not offer advice or assistance unless we are asked.”

I try to conceive of an appropriate sculpture, but my imagination fails me. I remember the bus pausing at the other constructions as we drove in. One, a giant reaching hand, was made by the third session last year. The design was not bad, but it didn’t seem durable enough to last more than a couple of years. Even at that, though, it will outlast some of the hands that made it.

“As for short-term projects,” the director goes on, “there is one that you can start thinking about tonight. You all have bunk names by now, I hope. I want each bunk to have a banner signifying its bunk name. They must be ready by this time tomorrow and will be judged by Nurse Barton, Nurse Lancaster, and Lab Technician Abrams. A box of Hershey’s bars goes to the winner.”

Our bunk and some of the others cheer.

“But I warn the older bunks not to get too excited. Last session the nine-year-old girls won.” He glances around the circle. “All right,” he finally says. “Starting with the eight-year-old girls, let’s have each bunk stand up and shout out its name.”

The eight-year-old girls rise and shout “The Astronauts!” Then the eight-year-old boys stand up and shout “The Tigers!” The skit and sculpture are good ideas, although I don’t particularly look forward to them, but the idea of carrying banners to the campfire like tribes in fourth



century Europe strikes me as silly. So when our turn comes I am the only one who does not shout "Princes in Exile!" even though I like the name and consider it fitting. I am probably acting snobbish, but this ritual is childish, and while it is merely painful for me to think of myself as a child now, it is unbearable to realize that I will never be anything more.

The director sits down and the counselor with the good voice leads us in song. While we are singing, fruit punch is brought out and the bunks take turns toasting marshmallows on the fire. It is darker now and a comfortable breeze is blowing. Despite my not singing and my contempt for childishness, I am not unhappy here. There is an intimacy in the circle, a warmth that does not come from the fire.

We sing "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," "This Land Is Your Land," "If I Had a Hammer," and "Kumbaya." I begin to wonder if there exists a camp song that will not be sung tonight, but after "Kumbaya" the counselor calls it quits. We all cheer and then break up to return to our cabins.

As our bunk approaches the fire, Robert motions to me and the others to stand close together with our backs to Rick. We do this even though Robert ignores our questions why. He looks at the fire, then glances around to make certain Rick and the other counselors and staff are not watching. After a moment he bends down and picks out a small, cool stick, the tip of which he puts into the fire. When the fire has caught, he stands up, tilts his head back, raises the arm holding the stick, and extinguishes the flame in his mouth.

We are all lying in our beds. Jim, the C.I.T. , has gone out, but Rick is here, which probably explains the quiet. The lights are still on; we have thirty minutes until lights out. We can spend this time talking, reading, writing letters, or going to the bathroom, which is about a hundred yards away.

I try reading *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* by Diderot, but I cannot concentrate—too many thoughts about today. So I close the book and look around at my bunk mates. I know all their names by now, but Louis and Robert are the only ones I've really talked to. We and Larry are all sixteen. Gabriel, Tyler, Jason, and Peter are fifteen. Jason has shoulder-length blond hair like I used to have. I don't like to look at him because he reminds me of it and I miss it greatly. I have a wig at home, but that is not the same, and I could not wear it here. Who would I be fooling?

Jason's gotten a lot of kidding because he brought his electric guitar. Who brings an electric guitar to camp? I've heard him defend himself by saying that there were electric guitars at Woodstock. But this is not Woodstock and Jason isn't Jimi Hendrix. Still, it will be interesting to see whether he's ever allowed to play it.

Gabriel is chubby, with thin red hair growing back after being lost to chemotherapy. I can't decide whether he looks very young or very old. Right now he's doing the lotus position and his eyes are closed, meditating, no doubt.

Tyler is the only one of us from the country, a fact readily observable by his torn overalls, his heavy southern accent, and his horrible English. He is how I always picture Appalachians.

Of Larry and Peter I know even less. Larry is short and seems very friendly. He is also the only one in our bunk to have a girlfriend among the female campers. Peter has curly black hair and acne. He must lift weights, for, although he is shorter than Robert, he is just as muscular. He also has good pot, at least that's Robert's opinion. He told me they smoked some this morning. Right now the two of them are playing cards with Tyler and Jason. Larry is talking to Rick.

Jim, the C.I.T., is caught in the middle, both in terms of age, he's nineteen, and authority. He can probably relate to us better than

Rick can, not only because he's younger, but also because he used to have leukemia. I don't know him at all, but, like the medical staff and parents of kids who have died or have been cured of cancer who volunteer their services, Jim's presence here is admirable.

As I look around the cabin at my bunk mates, I think how strange it is that people I hadn't heard of yesterday might become good friends tomorrow. Of all of them, I think Louis is the one I might grow close to. I have more in common with Louis than I do with Robert. Louis is an excellent student and the only one in the bunk besides myself who brought more than one book to read. He reminds me of Warren, who used to be my best friend, who still is really, although I haven't seen him much lately. But then I wonder whether I want to be close to anyone here. It's difficult to make good friends when you might lose them at any time, but it is also difficult to keep your distance. This I know from experience.

Lights out is fifteen minutes away and I still have some writing to do. I climb down and put the book back in my footlocker, then I surreptitiously pull out a blue spiral notebook from under a pile of clothes and hurry back up to my bed.

I turn to the first page, which is not a part of the journal, but a private goal sheet not meant to ever be seen by anyone. Of course, I have many more goals than are written here, but these are the two most important ones, the ones I must accomplish before dying in order for my life to have been worthwhile.

I need not look at them; I've looked at them a thousand times—they're branded in my memory. But it helps to look at them, and it helps me to mouth the words, as if every physical expression of my intent will help bring me closer to its fulfillment.

Marlene dances through my thoughts, and I try to summon confidence. My eyes burn the page as I read and read again:

1. lose virginity
2. make a contribution—publication of journal

Finally, I turn to page eighty-two, jot down the date, and write: “Camp—first day. Cancer everywhere, not just in campers. There is much beauty here, but the greater the beauty the greater the potential for decay, hence my dilemma. This is only the first day, but it feels like a week. I would be homesick if there were anything to miss about home.”

“Let’s call it a day,” Rick says before I can write any more. I hide my journal back underneath the pile of clothes and undress. Then I climb back up and make myself comfortable in bed.

A moment later Jim comes in and the lights are turned out. The talking continues, of course, and occasionally there is a shout among the whispering and Rick says “Shut up!”

I realize I have never slept in a bunk bed before. This is my first time at summer camp and I have no brothers or sisters, so it’s never even been a possibility. At first I think that bunk beds are for children, but then I remember that sailors sleep this way. Besides, I like it. It feels peaceful to lie several feet above the floor. I don’t know why I’m not afraid of falling off. Probably because I’ve never heard of anyone falling off a bunk bed. I only wish it weren’t so dark in here so that I could take advantage of the window, which is directly across from me. Just as I realize I won’t be able to see outside anyway, someone turns on a flashlight and for several seconds I see my reflection clearly in the glass. I seem very far away and am glad when the flashlight is switched off. But I continue to gaze toward the window, contemplating the proliferation of cancer and trees.

## TUESDAY

It is early—too early. I only get up at this hour for school. And the birds! I've never heard such a racket in the morning. The crickets didn't bother me last night, but this chirping gives me a headache, perhaps because I'm so tired and was so suddenly and rudely awakened. But I am not allowed to go back to sleep, so I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, yawn, and rub my eyes. The others are in the same condition.

"Listen up," Rick says in a voice louder than necessary. "Here's the daily schedule. Seven o'clock, as you know by now, is wake up. Seven forty-five is flag raising. Eight is breakfast. Eight forty-five is cabin cleanup and inspection. The cabins will be judged and the cleanest will be rewarded. Nine-fifteen to ten-fifteen is the first activity period. The second is from ten-thirty to eleven-thirty. Then you have a half hour free time before lunch. One to two is rest period, followed by the third, fourth, and fifth activity periods. Dinner is at six, flag lowering at seven, and the evening program or free time from seven-thirty till nine. Lights out for you guys is ten-thirty on weekdays and midnight on Friday and Saturday. Med call, for those who need it, follows meals."

"What about field trips?" Jason asks.

"We will probably have one each week. They generally take all day and pre-empt the regular activities."

"Where are we going this week?"

"To a cave."

"Mammoth Cave?" Larry asks excitedly.

Rick shakes his head no. "A small cave, not far from here. You've probably never heard of it."

The thought of going to a cave interests me, at least more so than taking a field trip to a factory or catching butterflies on a nature hike. But I don't let myself get too excited, we could be doing those things next week.

Rick tacks a large chart to the wall by the door. "This is the duty sheet," he says.

"What are the duties?" Peter asks.

"Setting and clearing the table, sweeping the cabin, and anything else that comes up. The winners today are Larry and Louis."

"Damn," Larry says. "I haven't had to do chores in a year!"

Rick smiles. "Don't worry. It's like riding a bicycle."

I am sitting between Gabriel and Louis in the mess hall, eating toast and sausage and scrambled eggs. The toast and sausage are fine, but the eggs are undercooked.

"Has anyone besides Louis signed up for the sculpture committee?" Rick asks, looking around the table.

No one answers.

Louis looks at me. "Why don't you sign up?" he asks.

"I'm not a committee person," I answer, slightly embarrassed by my apathy. "Besides, I can't think of any ideas."

"Have you thought of anything?" Gabriel asks Louis.

"No," Louis replies assuredly. "But I will."

Rick leaves the table and Jim, the C.I.T., leans over toward Robert. "That was quite a stunt you pulled last night," he says.

We are all surprised, Robert most of all. "What stunt?" he asks, trying to appear innocent.

"I saw what you did at the fire," Jim says. "But don't worry, I won't report you. Just don't do it again."

"Oh, I won't," Robert replies. "It would be anticlimactic to perform a feat like that twice before the same audience."

“Well, don’t go looking for another audience. Don’t ruin it for yourself by getting into trouble.” He rises, impressed with his own perceptiveness, and leaves the table. Robert sits back, relieved.

“So what are you going to do today?” Peter asks. “Swallow your butterknife?”

Robert shakes his head. “No,” he says in a serious voice, “I’m going to jump off the roof of our cabin.”

We all laugh. The class clown, I think, and picture him doing cartwheels in front of the principal’s office and handstands on the stairway. Anything for attention.

I am in the medical station for med call. I’m taking seventy-five milligrams of the steroid Decadron twice a day.

I want Marlene to give me my medication, but I wind up getting it from Sarah. I can still look at Marlene, though, and take my time leaving. For a moment she notices that I am staring at her and she smiles. I begin to feel more relaxed and smile back. Then I leave, feeling satisfied, as if I accomplished something.

Robert is waiting for me outside. “Well, did you ask her if she was married?”

I shake my head. “No.”

Robert frowns. “Pussy.”

“I wasn’t in her line,” I protest. “Sarah gave me my medication. Besides, I can’t just come out and ask her something like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’ll know why I’m asking.”

“All the better.”

“It would be embarrassing,” I add.

Robert gives me a disappointed look. “Embarrassment, Rafferty, is not for people like us. Why waste your time when it’s so important? What have you got to lose?”

“Nothing.” I realize and remind myself that I have always been shy with girls, and cancer has not given me the courage to approach them.

“What about you?” I ask, deciding to put him on the defensive. “Why don’t you go after her? And don’t tell me some crap about she’s not your type.”

Robert starts walking slowly away from the building; I keep pace beside him. “She *isn’t* my type,” he says. “None of the girls here are my type.”

I stare without meaning to.

“No, I’m not gay,” he adds, answering the question I can only ask with my eyes. “I’ve had my share of girlfriends. But it just doesn’t mean as much to me as it used to. There are other things I have to do now, more important things.”

“Like swallowing fire?”

“Yes,” he replies without humor. “I guess you can say I’m going steady with Death.”

I laugh, and he looks at me as if wondering what could be funny. “Isn’t that a bit morbid?” I ask.

“I don’t think so. It keeps me from giving up.”

“How?”

“Because I cannot escape death. I know it will one day beat me, through cancer or something else. But it can only beat me once, while I can beat it every day, by swallowing fire and jumping off the roof and taking other risks.”

I am stunned. “You mean you were serious about jumping off the roof?”

He nods. “I’ll need some help, though. I don’t think I can manage it alone.”

The thought of him leaping off our cabin roof frightens me, and it angers me to think that he considers it necessary. “But you don’t



have to do that,” I tell him. “You beat death just by waking up each morning.”

“I know,” he admits, “but it isn’t the same. I have to grab Death by the throat,” he says, grabbing mine, “and show him I’m not afraid. I have to tease him the way he teases me. Do you understand?”

His eyes are pleading. “A little,” I say.

“I know all you guys think of me as a show-off, and I am a show-off. I like to perform in front of others. But I would jump off the roof even if no one was watching. Because Death is watching.”

“But what if you get hurt?”

“I have to believe I won’t get hurt. When I take a dangerous risk that I don’t have to take and come away unscathed I feel invulnerable; I feel like nothing can hurt me. And those brief feelings of invulnerability give me the strength to keep fighting. “

I nod. The more I think about it the more I understand. For am I not also doing the same thing with my goals? The only difference is that I am strangling Life instead of Death, trying to squeeze from it the fulfillment I want before it slips away.

I look across at Robert and it is a different person I see.

Louis runs up to us as we approach the cabin. “Hey, Ryan, will you help me with the banner?”

“He can’t,” Robert tells him before I can reply. “I need him to help me with my stunt.”

Louis looks confused. “What stunt?”

“My jump off the roof,” Robert explains.

“You’re really going to do that?”

“With a little help from my friends,” he says with a smile.

Louis turns to me. “And you’re going to help him?”

I shrug.

“But I need someone to help me with the banner, and no one wants to do it. I’ll never have it ready on time if I have to make it alone.”

“I couldn’t help you anyway, Louis. I can’t draw.”

“You don’t have to draw, just cut. Now come on, you know how to work a pair of scissors. We can take out time from one of our activity periods.”

I look at Robert. “How long do you need me for?”

“Not long,” he replies. “Just make sure you show up for horseback riding this afternoon.”

“Why horseback riding?” I ask.

Robert looks at our cabin and the hard ground surrounding it. “I need some hay to land on.”

The arts and crafts shed is filled with the clutter and shouting of eight-year-olds. Louis and I sit in the corner, working on the banner. The emblem is as he first suggested: a prince standing outside his castle with the drawbridge up. We are making it out of colored felt on a white background. The castle is gray, the drawbridge brown, the prince sky-blue, and his crown yellow. Louis selects the colors and does the drawing. I merely nod my approval and cut out the shapes.

“Why haven’t you ever gone to camp before?” Louis asks, drawing the castle.

“I went to day camp when I was young.”

“That doesn’t count. What about summer camp? Are you poor?”

“Maybe now, after all my treatment, but not before. I just wasn’t into group activities and doing things with kids my own age. I preferred to spend my summers reading and going to hospitals.”

“Hospitals?”

“Yeah, I was really interested in medicine. Sometimes I’d get kicked out because of my age, but I learned to be inconspicuous.”

“What would you do there?”

“Just walk around, check out the wards, talk to patients. Then I volunteered when I was old enough.”

Louis frowns. “Why would you want to spend your free time in hospitals?”

“I don’t know,” I reply. “That was a long time ago.” Louis resumes his drawing. I watch him for a time in silence. “Are you graduating this year?” I finally ask.

“I hope so. What about you?”

“I’m not thinking that far ahead. I would have graduated this year if I hadn’t gotten sick.”

“One of the hardest things for me to do is keep up in school. I’m out so much. And this is senior year, I can’t afford to miss much. And after that there’s college to worry about!”

“College,” I echo. “What’s that?”

I am returning from the stables, a bale of hay under each arm. It is my second and final trip. Muscle-bound Peter and Robert are doing the same, but clowning, pretending the weight of the bales is enormous.

We are telling those who ask that the hay is related to the banner project and we leave it to their imaginations to figure out how. So far we have had no trouble, but we must avoid Rick and Jim because they are less likely to be fooled.

I cut across the clearing toward the woods without being noticed. But when I enter the woods, I see the girl with crutches several yards away. I cannot avoid her, because she has also seen me and is watching me as if I were a new species at the zoo. So I walk forward casually, as if carrying hay were normal procedure.

“What are you doing?” she asks authoritatively.

“Nothing,” I tell her, surprised to hear such a strong voice from a thin girl.

“What’s all the hay for?”

“Our banner,” I say and quickly walk past. She follows me, and I am impressed by how fast she moves on crutches. I realize I can’t outdistance her. Besides, she knows where I’m headed.

“Something’s going on here,” she says.

We reach the cabin and I peek inside—no one’s there. I turn to the girl, thinking that I could probably tell her another lie or somehow convince her to leave. But I do not want her to leave. She is one of the three cute fifteen and sixteen-year-olds.

I stash the hay behind a tree, along with the other bales, and cover it as best I can with leaves. Then I look at the girl.

“Can I trust you?”

“Sure.”

For a moment I am tempted to impress her by telling her that I am the one who is going to jump from the roof. But she would discover the truth soon enough and that would make me look even worse. Besides, why should I care how I look to her? Marlene is the one I’m in love with.

“A friend of mine is going to jump off the roof,” I tell her in a soft voice.

“Into the hay?”

I nod.

She laughs. “Why that’s nuts.”

“I know.”

“What if he gets hurt?”

“He’s already hurt.”

“But won’t you guys get in trouble?”

I shrug. “If anyone finds out. But what are they going to do?”

She doesn’t answer but instead looks at our cabin, assessing the distance from the roof to the ground. “Can I watch?”

We are all assembled outside our cabin except, of course, for Rick and Jim, who have gone ahead to the mess hall. Robert has

decided to jump now while he can do it on an empty stomach and it is still daylight, but supper is in fifteen minutes and we must hurry in order not to arouse suspicion.

The hay has been stacked under Robert's supervision and, after inspecting the bales a final time, he climbs quickly and easily up the side of the log cabin and is soon sitting on the edge of the slanted roof, a good twelve feet off the ground.

Judging from appearances, I am more nervous than Robert. The possibility of his missing the hay is quite a valid one. I had suggested that he also use mattresses, but he replied that they would get dirty, or the blankets we laid on them would get dirty and thus make it easier for Rick to catch us. He also told me that he preferred a small target. "There's no risk with mattresses," he said. "I might as well jump into the lake."

We are quiet in anticipation. Robert looks straight down at the hay, concentrating. Then he nods to tell us he's ready. We call Tyler, who springs back from his lookout position to watch the jump.

The girl with the crutches and I exchange glances. Robert approved her watching, and I feel proud in a childish sort of way because I am the only one here standing next to a girl. Robert slowly rises to a crouching position, then straightens up when he is certain of his balance. He takes no notice of his audience but stares straight down. If he feels any apprehension now, it does not show.

He jumps, and the hay scatters. For a moment we are all frozen, wondering if he is hurt. Then he stands up, all triumph and smiles, and wipes the hay from his pants.

We cheer, but he shrugs it off, and I realize there is less vanity in him than humility. "Easier than it looks," he says. "Now let's get rid of this hay and get our asses to the mess hall."

I shake his hand when he comes over and pat him on the back, the deepest show of affection I have given a friend in months.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” I ask as a joke, knowing he will not take it as one.

