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Merit Badge

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My mother didn't believe in the Girl Scouts.

I don't know if this was an ethnic thing, as if Girl Scouts were akin to the Daughters of the American Revolution, or if their hand-to-heart devotions put my mother in mind of the Hitler Youth: picture the Girl Scouts knocking on the doors of our working-class neighborhood to gather up we dark others—Italians, I mean—and force us to reveal, at pain of a thousand jumping jacks, the secret ingredients of our great-grandmother's gravy. Perhaps the idea of great numbers of girls in uniform and the group-think that implied, toasting their marshmallows and weenies on rows of neatly stacked sticks, went against the grain of the hectic energies of my mother's 1960s activism and flower power love-ins. My mother was a lover of individualism, whose mantra she was prone to belt out while painting the rooms of our house tangerine orange and cobalt blue: "*Vive la différence.*"

I wasn't allowed to join the Girl Scouts, but one day, my brother and I were enlisted to "play our instruments" for a local troop. I was ten, and my brother was thirteen; I played the mandolin, and he played the guitar in duets our Neapolitan grandfather had taught to us and scored. It's possible we worked in a rendition of The

Beatles' "Yesterday," but mainly I remember the, by turns, plaintive ("*Sospiri*") and festive ("*Funiculì, Funiculà*") old world (read "other world") strummings that we shared, and how peculiarly risky it felt to be making public the private murmurings of my familial enclosure, the ritualized attentions to the sounds of a

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place elsewhere but immanent, this coterie of the heart and enclave of the soul that was usually confined to my grandparents' living room. I could have been wearing a sari and playing a sitar. In fact, I was wearing a polyester checked shirt of my own choosing, red cut-off shorts, and a pair of Converse sneakers. I remember feeling glad that, for once, I wasn't in uniform, only the audience was (since my mother hadn't yet left the Catholic church, it was the case that I regularly donned the uniform of Catholic school). I remember feeling surprised that the Girl Scouts actually enjoyed our concert—they cheered and smiled and didn't fall asleep—and at the end of the affair, the den mother, Mrs. DiBello, gave me a pin with a Girl Scout insignia on it, making me, I felt, an honorary member.

Not merely yellow, the pin was the color of butterscotch, mate to the matte gold of trophies or the sash splayed across a Girl Scout's chest of freshly starched green. Without the uniform, I couldn't wear the pin, nor did I want to. And so I didn't, but kept it in what I called my "nothing drawer," in a space that waited, as though reserved for it, midway between my coin collection of Buffalo head nickels and Mercury head dimes, a stash of differently colored opalescent buttons and unpolished rocks. I hoarded it like an inedible piece of candy and, from time to time, removed it from my drawer to study it as I might a coin from a foreign country.

I liked the way it made me *of* the group but *above* the group, peering in.

My Girl Scout pin was a piece of paraphernalia. Like the epaulettes without the uniforms sold at flea markets or the Army jacket a neighbor girl's father had stripped from the body of a dead German soldier and which my friend, a girl named Betty Ann, now wore. He must have been a small soldier for the jacket to fit her, and her father—he who kept it as a trophy—was so lumbering and large, with a made-up seeming surname that suited him and all the neighborhood, the simple name of “Toyle.” I winced whenever Betty Ann Toyle wore the jacket and, for a period of time, preferred to play with her brother; day in, day out, for what felt like an entire summer, though maybe it was only for a week, we played together at Army. Johnny Toyle had a replete collection of G.I. Joe dolls, and we'd meet beneath the hedges, face down in the dirt, our crotches pressed firmly into the earth just like Joe's as he crouched and wriggled in camouflage. The panoply of miniature accouterments was endless: bazookas, rifles, handguns and helmets, tanks and parachutes, tiny black boots and hip-slung belts. When one of our Joes threw a hand grenade, we'd make bits of dirt and doll fly into the air, while all throughout our play, we said nothing but the artillery plosives I'd learned from Johnny: *doudge doudge; doudge; doudge doudge doudge*.

Mr. Toyle, who hunted ducks and deer, would come home from his hunting trips with the deer tied upside down to the back of their station wagon. Every day, their black Labrador retriever would bolt from the house as though from a pen to make the same fervent round: across the street, and through the circular path cut by a neighbor's hedge, then back to the house, without a bounty. Daily, Mr. Toyle, beer above to match belly below, would cuss out Johnny, who, evidently, didn't hunt well. He called him “sissy” and “cry baby” and “little girl” (that old saw). As far as Johnny and I were concerned, there was nothing strange about our taking pleasure together in G.I. Joe; nor would it have occurred to us to play anywhere other than out in the open of the narrow road that separated our row homes, within view of parents, neighbors, and friends. The play spaces afforded by a strip of dirt or patch of earth that passed for a yard before our houses were small and, therefore, all the more suited to intimate un-bounded-ness: we must have felt protected by the net our imaginations cast around us as our Joes clanked their dog tags inside a jungle made of dandelions, as we slaked our thirst with the camaraderie of a canteen, then covered when the limbs of our dolls sputtered upward with upheaval, incapable of shedding blood.

The Woods were a different story. While it's true that wooded areas—no matter urban, suburban, or rural—are generally referred to as “the” woods, almost every segment of our nondescript neighborhood sported a definite article: The Pool, The Alley, The Lot (a hill for sledding on), and The Woods, designated zones where terror and play overlapped and switched places. “Me, Tarzan. You, Jane.” *The Woods* sounds like the words of a caveman or a zombie learning to point and, later, talk. By heading every part of our world with the article *the*, we projected a sense of ours being the only woods, pool, alley, and lot in the world.

The Woods wasn't a place for dolls but for child bodies themselves, snapping wood under foot, swinging from tires into a nearby creek, rolling or sledding down Dead Man's

Cliff, and, most of all, playing a game, more sinister than tag, called “capture.” This game of glorified hide-and-seek involved at least two teams, with the goal of one to find the other who went hiding in The Woods. The minute you found a member of the other team—he could be buried under leaves or deep inside a hole dug expressly for the purpose weeks before—you were supposed to yell, “Capture!” then drag him by the scruff of a piece of his clothing back to your own team. The game usually resulted in getting lost, with or without your team, in The Woods, or one group would decide not to look for the other group in The Woods at all. This strange out-of-sight, out-of-mind approach always struck me as particularly cruel, and I noticed how, by such agreed-upon oblivion, the group would morph from “team” to “band,” from capture to obliterate.

If my mother didn’t allow me to join the Girl Scouts, she also wasn’t keen on slumber parties or sleepovers, especially if these required actual overnight trips. As one who never ventured into The Woods—though she did enjoy a view of the creek from an elevated bridge—my mother never concerned herself with our playing in The Woods. If the city didn’t exist in my imagination, The Woods didn’t exist in hers. It is for these reasons that I don’t know whose pain of shock was greater, hers or mine, adult or child, upon being told the news of the disappearance of a boy from our neighborhood. Eleven-year-old Terrence Bowers hadn’t exactly gotten lost in The Woods, but was murdered there. But not in our woods. Terry was murdered in a nearby Boy Scout camp, his troop’s excursion sponsored by our neighborhood church, Blessed Virgin Mary. At ten



years old, I only overheard but didn't read particular details of his death. The facts I couldn't keep out and failed to understand was that he was "stabbed numerous times through his sleeping bag" and that no one knew who did it. That the camp counselors might be suspects and that something more horrible than stabbing might have also happened to the boy.

I never understood "tow-headed" when I listened to the television tell of Terry's death. I knew him to be blond and his lips to be red with water ice, his belt always overhanging the skinny frame of his hips, his feet confidently running in sneakers without socks. I thought he lived on Mermont Circle—the scariest nearby road to me at Halloween, for how it turned, then turned again, until The Lot fell out of view and I couldn't tell where my own street next began. Really, he lived on Branford Road, a street perpendicular to mine. Terry, I am certain, is the boy who, shirtless and brave, got to ride a large fish in a stadium-sized aquarium in the episode of my childhood that may or may not have ever happened.

If this had ever really happened, the setting must have been either the Franklin Institute or the zoo. I was tiny, and the room was gigantic, larger, really, than any room I'd ever been in, though no one held my hand. The room was made almost entirely of a fish tank, whose waters, in my memory, were greenish yellow and inside of which one could see, from the wooden bleachers on which we sat, the white-gray speeding playfulness of dolphins. Because the pool was made of glass and see-through, I remember feeling both delighted and afraid that the dolphins seemed so close. To and fro, to and fro they veered, nearer to and farther from the beach ball of my mind; one minute, they were near to hand, smiling as they bobbed, and the next, they were gone, having bolted toward some other child on the far side of the tank, less visible for the sea-foam that bubbled in their wake.

I was riveted, and then seductively stunned: a woman who stood on the edge of the aquarium asked for volunteers. All she needed, she explained, was one girl and one boy who would like to take a ride across the pool beside the dolphin. You would only need to hold on to his fin. Would anyone raise his hand? I shuddered, and wondered, and wanted so to raise my hand. I could swim, couldn't I? Though I'd been slow to learn to float, I'd been getting lessons at The Pool with a man who would take me away from the other kids who had already advanced to paddling, to help me put my head underwater. He'd place a metal disk at the bottom of the pool, retrieve it, then invite me to do the same. Mostly, I remember how the water blurred the edges of the item until it became a slowed down hockey puck with a deep-bass voice to match and how the sting of my eyes by the chlorine made me smart as though I'd been sucking on a SweetTart.

But maybe swimming wasn't required in the aquarium.

"You'll just jump in, hold on, and the dolphin'll do the rest," the lady said.

Then this lifeguard-looking woman made a visor of her hand: "Do I see a girl out there, or boy, who wants to ride the dolphins? Well, I'll be darned! I do!" My hand wasn't halfway up yet—I mean, I couldn't fathom how I'd do this in my clothes though I so wished to—when one boy and one girl scurried from their separate, far-off seats in the bleachers, tossed their shoes aside, and the boy, his shirt. He was skinny and blond like Terry, and he rubbed

his arms to take off the shiver while hopping excitedly from foot to foot. The girl stood stock-still, as though she were keen to balance an imaginary book that she held on her head—a practice she'd perfected between piano lessons.

First, the lifeguard lady made the two hold hands, then instructed them that on the count of “a, b, c,” they should slip into the water and hold each dolphin by its side. From an adult point of view, I wonder: “Could these kids have been a plant?” In my child-mind, I questioned if they were really going to dive in wearing clothes. Before I knew it, they were in and they were off. I squinted and saw and watched them ride, rising and falling, rising and falling, without exactly coming up for air. They *were* the air, with no ear or nose plugs, or goggles or bathing caps. It was like watching a child cowboy perform in a rodeo, except these two hadn't been trained. It was entirely up to the dolphins to be good to them, to take them for the ride of their lives back and forth across the pool, then gently deposit them again on the shore; all they needed was their trust.

I don't mean to wave a handkerchief in the direction of my murdered neighbor, depositing him in a Disney-seeming fable of “the boy who rode the dolphin.” That isn't it at all. It's just that wherever this episode happened—inside of what fold of the real meeting up with the imaginary—Terry was there, too. Not exactly the Land of Nod, but a realm of hints where something leaves the “sure.” Because, if this never happened, where did I have to be sitting in order to feel as though it did? What category do we have for a memory so vivid of something that never occurred? At ten years old, I couldn't fathom that Terry had been “killed,” and I still can't, though the papers spoke of his “bloody clothes.”

I don't know if I ever hoped to wear a Boy Scout uniform, but I definitely coveted my brother's special garments—the cassock and surplice of the altar boy. My brother was prone to sleepwalking, and one night, not only did he rise from his bed, but also descended the staircase, opened the closet, and donned his cassock and surplice before heading out into the chill of a winter, mid-night. Often, he sweated beneath the layers of red and white cotton, on-stage, among the candles with their molten reflection in gold chalices, or—why not?—a beaker, of transfigured water and wine, body and blood, but that night, he froze. He said he thought he was behind the altar in his waking-dream, but doing what? Whatever they did back there. What did the boys do behind the altar? What furtive nothings, what secret words did they mumble on that marble stage where incense was okay but cigarettes verboten, where no one would suspect their unscrubbed knees beneath their regal boy-dresses? I could not know.

And what about Terry?

Do Boy Scouts sleep in their uniforms or in pajamas? Was he wearing his hat, his tie, or his badge? He was probably shirtless, and not at all afraid, just like he was in my *dreamory*, though warmer because tucked inside his sleeping bag. He *was* sleeping, right? And therefore didn't see a thing? And if he were afraid, the Boy Scouts would have taught him how not to be afraid, I am sure of it. They would have offered the life lessons of self-reliance—how to whittle sticks and live on ice-fishing in the wilderness; how to climb fist over fist up a slippery slope; when to tell stories in The Woods and when to listen for the crackling flame

or flickering wind. How to tell the difference between love and harm; guilt and innocence; truth or dare; good people and bad people; girls and boys.

When I was invited to give a talk for a business men's club in Providence, Rhode Island, where I live, I accepted. Having nothing to proselytize but only my art to share in the form of some passages from my latest book, I saw no need either to lace my talk at the Wannamoisset Country Club with critiques of capitalism or to ask where all the women were. These guys were buying me lunch.

In a letter tucked inside an envelope bearing the Liberty Bell "Forever" stamp, the director thanked me for my "most wonderful talk."

"As I said when introducing you," he wrote, "you are a well-spoken woman, whether at the lectern before seventeen men, at a table with seven, or in the cloakroom with one. I hope your URI students appreciate this as much as we did today."

You'd think I had been a stripper from the sounds of it, but my host was being gracious for my having helped him hang his coat. He was elderly and having trouble walking; added to that, he was having trouble seeing. So when he went to hang his coat on a telephone in the cloakroom, I promptly found a hanger for it and joked about my own mistakes and, given the paces of my job, all the sleep I'd recently missed. *Well-spoken* seemed to go along with *handsome* in describing a woman, and I'd regretted he hadn't also added that. His inhabitation of a world long-gone was rendered ever quainter by a parenthetical appended at the bottom of his letter, next to his phone coordinates, where he instructed his readers: ANSWERING MACHINE AFTER 3RD RING.



The Netopian Club members were an interesting, and smart, and receptive audience (why wouldn't they be?), and at the end of the proceedings, they delivered to me a token for my efforts: wedged inside its own fake velvet box lay a thickly bodied blue-gold ballpoint pen with the words NETOPIAN CLUB embossed on it. The Netopian Club pen as swag wasn't the sort of pen one is meant to write with, though it could have been a perfect gift for me since I still compose by hand. Like Dante, I'm at a mid-point in my life, and a crisis point in my writing, but instead of hovering between the rings of purgatory and the rings of hell, I bob, flurriedly and distracted between paper and screen.

The day before, I'd been quashing elderberries underfoot while I traversed a walkway on the college campus where I taught. Maybe not elderberries, but some type of berry that grew on a tree and that made the bird-doo blue. The day before I'd missed the harvest sun, but had heard about it; so, too, these berries. I'd just finished teaching "Benevolence" by Tony Hoagland, that poem that begins, "When my father dies and comes back as a dog, / I already know what his favorite sound will be: / the soft, almost inaudible gasp / as the rubber lips of the refrigerator door / unstick, followed by that arctic // exhalation of cool air..." We'd been discussing the wending of the metaphors in this poem: how they performed the subject they addressed because wasn't all metaphor a form of re-incarnation? All metaphor brings something otherwise dead back to life. And the dog! What a perfect figure for the alcoholism the poem addressed, the animal craving, the slavish devotion.

Imagine being able to reorder the relationship of past to present, I asked my students, by re-writing the past from the point of view of a future in which the living and the dead remember differently and together. If the adult was like a giant to the child, in the poem, the child lords it over the father, now returned in the form of a dog forced to sit at the child's feet, "trembling, expectant," while he prepares for him a drink. We talked about "benevolence"—kindness, goodwill—as always shot through with power, and the reasons we don't expect the word *benevolence* inside the private ministrations of a family but only as a form of public good. By the end of the poem, the metaphor literally comes full circle, turning back on itself to coil into the form of a fist, and never before has a fist been so redolent of meaning: the boy, as it turns out, had been the dog, performing a "hundred clever tricks" he taught himself to please the father, mistakenly believing "that it was love he held concealed in his closed hand"—the fist as tease, holding a treat and withholding its love, the fist as a hand-turned-weapon.

Walking perhaps in the zone of susceptibilities made possible by poetry, I become aware of how filled to the brim an instant is with accidental encounters: with elderberries, say, and just then the unintended eye contact with a college boy clutching to adjust his crotch through his sweatpants at the same time that my own hand happened to be rubbing a pain in my breast, my own tooth biting the side of my lip. Does the aloneness of being in our own bodies bring out the desire to clash or meld, to hide away or merge? Do I stow the earthy meeting in the observation tower of my mind or let it enter me? Who asked for the crotch-scratcher to enter my line of vision while contemplating the nature of paternal violence? The world is one big *interruptus* without the accompanying *coitus*.

Movies still have the power to trigger traumatic memories, and it was at a screening of *The Hunger Games* that I suddenly remembered Terry, and all the gaps attached to him, the gaping cries, the hollowed-out wounds, the blunting of perspective, the bludgeoning of the news, the seeds of fear the incident planted inside our child-minds to fester because never fully felt. I saw this update of *The Lord of the Flies* long after its heyday, in a two-dollar movie theater whose floors are sticky with the Soda Pops of the Ages and where they only project damaged prints: typically a showing at Movie Magic is distinguished by a scratch that separates the images in long black lines. If at first I'm game to enter the bluish atmosphere of this sci-fi dystopia's hollowed-out world, whose plot is entertainingly thin, whose landscape is parched and ravaged though not without its Woods, I begin to feel uneasy at some co-location of a crouching body, a hunting bow pulled taut, a child trying to hide herself in leaves. The violence is both surreal and banal; the movie theater is dark, but I feel punched and also suddenly visible, visibly frightened, and awash with memories of the death of Terry Bowers for the first time in over thirty years. There's a fantasy space of the film that I'm loath to enter until I'm no longer paying attention to the film at all. Is it possible a film like this can only really titillate and properly entertain if one hasn't known real violence in The Woods?

If you open a hole in the body, it will bleed, and if you fail to staunch it, it will bleed to death. We are, first of all, each of us a river, and later, at the end, a rock dropped in.

I was living in a summer cabin at the time I saw *The Hunger Games*, not exactly in The Woods, but rustic enough to be far from urban. If by mid-film, mid-afternoon, I began to feel uneasy, by the time I went to bed, I was engulfed in it: in memories of Terry's murder, of stabbing played a thousand different ways: a balloon being punctured, the scissoring of a doll, the evisceration of the hunt. I imagined the brute strength it must take to stab a living body and tried to picture being he who did it and to whom it had been done. Was Terry awakened by brute force, or was he killed while he was sleeping? And how had he been made the chosen one? If I'd been his mother, left with the unsolved crime, I'd be hard-pressed not to imagine the murder as a Boy Scout dare. I'd imagine everyone complicit in a silencing—how was it that not a single soul awoke? Had they drunk from the waters of Lethe the day before in the hike-side brook? How had the counselors failed to protect my child while they snored? Who had first found him, a counselor or fellow boy?

Memory can come in droplets and in beads, budlets you can open or ignore, or it can besiege us in an onslaught of unbidden-ness. Terry's death revisited me in summer, but I was writing this in fall. The time of year when nature stops imitating art and starts to imitate puzzles. When the rivulets inside New England woods or the rivers beneath the bridges shimmer black as the shale that rises up from below: is that a barcode reflected by fall's multicolored trees upon the water? Neither hunter plaid, nor Highland Scots, it's the plaid of two boys in a single kayak unattended by adults that I'm glimpsing from a bike path that runs along the river off Breakneck Road. It doesn't seem right that someone has set them to drift alone upon these waters, even though the baby boy who sits in front seems terribly old. His bowed back and reliance on his brother bespeaks that time in childhood when, for a spell, you're an old

man. You sit at the front and catch the view while your brother has to steer the boat and carry you. You make duck calls and try out groggy voices because you're old, so very old, and fading into the boat to become you while your brother carries you on his hip.

We didn't cover Terry's murder in *The Darby Times*, the newspaper that my friends Joanna DiBello, Donna Shannon, and I wrote at ten and which my mother typed for us. We didn't cover news, per se, but created personae, like Astrid the Astrologer, who wore a pointed cap and looked down into her folded arms to read the stars and foretell futures. We printed poems and song lyrics we were writing, made up Dear Adelaide advice columns, and announced contests we would sponsor: *Come around to 21 Concord and see if you can guess the number of buttons in the button jar. Prize: TBA.* Rather than record the things that happened, we drew and wrote the things we wished would happen. We tried out voices and sold our paper, along with loop-yarn potholders, door to door.

Of course, in the days I'm feeling Terry's murder years beyond its fact, I check the Internet for signs of what I can't remember. "No Peace for Mother of Scout Killed in 1970," I find, where Mrs. Bowers is quoted: "I put it in God's hands, and he just keeps handing it back to me." The newspapers offer a mélange of unstitched details: that the weapon, though never found, was "a single-edged knife." It gives us tallies: the boy was stabbed "once in the chest and three times in the back." There were twenty scouts, nine older boys and adults. It names the campground: the hills adjacent to St. Basil the Great Roman Catholic Church. It uses the word *outing*, and offers, as a lone detail, that one boy claimed to have seen Terry "at 2 a.m., sitting by himself outside the campfire." It says authorities ruled out that Terry had been "molested." It lists the suspects who have shadowed the case for all these years: an itinerant loon from the nearby "mean streets of Phoenixville," who was never known to murder anyone; a pair of men "in their early twenties," who were sighted by "a motorist" within one hundred feet of the campsite. It recounts the theory of a mentally unwell boyhood friend of Terry's, who believes that he was the one who was meant to be murdered when Terry was murdered instead. It mentions a detail germane to a made-for-TV movie: an inmate who claimed to have been present when a man who said he was the killer burned his own bloody clothing the next day. Mrs. Bowers attributes her husband's death by heart attack to the stress of the burden of the violent loss of her son. The paper says that, though inconsolable, she found solace from Families of Murder Victims, a group founded in 1980 by Frank and Deborah Spungen of Bala Cynwyd, whose twenty-year-old daughter was stabbed to death by Sid Vicious in the Chelsea Hotel.

When I compare my memory to what an Internet search can tell, I'm struck by discrepancies: I remembered that Terry was stabbed twenty times, not four. I experienced the murder as a massacre of one. But there's more.

I try to understand the opening of memory's floodgates and decide it has to do with safety. That I've never been more relaxed than I am right now, this summer at the camp I've made with my partner, Jean. It's a summer of overcoming fears—of bats and mice, of homophobes and snakes, of things that go bump in the night, and of swimming.



I can't really swim in the nearby lake because I need to know there are walls. Even paradise was a walled garden, don't forget. I don't like to swim because I don't understand the principles by which my body floats. This summer, something has convinced me there are pleasures that I'm missing, so I venture into the lake and immediately choose to drift upon my back. There's no one around, and Jean has swum off in the distance so that I'm left with the water's still ringing—a quiet trickle—the clouds and pine trees sweeping overhead, and the smell of a woodstove and tufts of smoke glancing by. *Hoooo*, I breathe out once, and again. I don't make an owl sound, but the sound of a restful dreaming. *Hoooo*, and with that, a chain of words appears, a little phrase, floating with me, and beneath me, and above me in the smoke that reads, *Asleep under the stars*.

That was the missing piece of the two-part sentence that began, "Boy Scout Stabbed to Death," and ended, "While Sleeping Under the Stars."

Like Dickinson's "certain Slant of light / Winter Afternoons," that pierces with no evidence of external scar, but leaves "internal difference where the meanings are," so this phrase had altered me at a core, but not in a way that could easily rise to surface. Now, I knew those were the words I most turned round toward, so as to picture as a girl the freedom of being without a house, without even a tent, like being in an aquarium with your hand stuck to a dolphin pulling you along until you're nothing but air. That was the image I'd harbored for years, that I had no correlate for: that was the main and only thing I remember from the way the tale was told to me in childhood—the companion phrase that resounded and that stuck. It seemed to sum up everything I was afraid of in my life.

“Tonight, you will sleep under the stars,” no need for cover. According to the story that I only now could hear, sleeping under the stars was the whole point of the excursion. It was how Terry was meant to earn his Merit Badge. 🐾