

CAMP WINDIBLO

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

ED WAS AMBIVALENT ABOUT TELLING HIS FRIENDS how he had killed the horse at Camp Windiblo. He thought it was a good story but he was never sure how they would react—would they think it was funny, or would they make fun of him for it? Camp Windiblo was located in the Berkshires, which, come to think of it, are themselves somewhat ambivalent in that they can't really decide whether they belong to New York or New England. Local experts on Berkshire demographics can pinpoint exactly those places with more New Yorkers and those with more Bostonians. The owners of the camp, however, came from neither New York nor Boston but from the Connecticut Valley in Western Mass., and in those days they mostly recruited children from the Valley.

Every year the owners would get kids to go out there camping sometime in the spring so that they would want to spend the summer at the camp. They would take the kids out on a fine April day and by nightfall the temperature had dropped so sharply you'd just about freeze in your pre-high-tech sleeping bag. When Ed made the annual April journey to Camp Windiblo one year, he found out that his prowess in playing ball didn't automatically transfer to pitching tents and making campfires. In fact, he proved himself to be a real klutz. After many years in the business, the owners knew a project when they saw one.

That year Ed's parents decided to go off to Europe for the summer, but they had not planned a sight seeing, picture snapping tour. Ed's father taught at one of the several colleges in the Valley, and since he had a big interest in Romanticism, he wanted to go to Germany to discover just what it was there that had made the young Werther suffer so. It was decided that Ed's younger brother and sister would be farmed out to a babysitter and he would go to Camp Windiblo, because it would be—what else—a good experience for

him. Ed's own preference was to stay at home and play ball—baseball, stick-ball, any kind of ball. Camp Windiblo used its softball field mainly for archery.

Like other camps in the Berkshires, Camp Windiblo had lots of arts and crafts, swimming in a pond, and the king of summer camp activities, horseback riding. There were several levels of horse back riding. The accomplished riders, those who actually knew how to ride, would get to roam the grounds of the camp and beyond. They could canter and in rare cases even gallop. A middle group was limited to the camp itself, but they could only canter and not gallop. The complete novices, including Ed, were confined to the horse ring. This ring was just across the dirt road from the horse barn and it was nothing more than a little fenced-in circular path that had been worn into the grass by several generations of children and their horses who would walk around it at an excruciatingly slow pace in a counter-clock-wise direction.

The children were too petrified to understand anything of what the camp counselors who specialized in horseback riding told them, while the counselors had a healthy and not unfounded fear that one of the horses might suddenly bolt with its precious cargo. That's why they liked to keep their directions simple and to the point: "Whoa there, take it easy. Slow down, gently does it. No, no, slower not faster. Hold on now. . ." For Ed and some of the other young boys the status of novice in the horse ring was a big comedown from the cowboy heroes they had always imagined themselves to be in their fantasies. Some of them even had chaps left over from a birthday cowboy outfit. The only trouble was, at least in Ed's case, riding lessons were not included with the chaps.

At the tryouts to determine the riders' levels, Ed got his foot in the stirrup with a little coaching from a counselor and vaulted suddenly into the saddle. In the effort to impress the counselors with his athleticism Ed inadvertently jammed his toe into the side of his mount. This, together with the suddenness of his leap into the saddle, caused the otherwise infinitely patient horse to bolt forward a few steps and throw great confusion into what had been a perfect line of horses, riders, and coaches. "Whoa there, Ed, where ya goin'!" cried one of the counselors, as the horse skittered off. Ed, meanwhile, was holding on to the saddle's pommel, frantically trying to get his other foot in the stirrup, so as to create at least a semblance of competence. Fortunately for Ed, his steed, who had been through this kind of drill before with many a previous tenderfoot, didn't go far and began munching on some

of the lush green grass off to the side of the ring. Only as he bent forward in a vain effort to take the reins that were now dangling on the ground did Ed realize the full absurdity and powerlessness of his situation. The counselor who came over and picked up the horse's reigns was just confirming the obvious, when he said, "Gee, Ed, I guess we're going to have to start from scratch with you."

Thus was Ed, prince of the ball fields, reduced to the pauper of Camp Windiblo's horse ring.

There was nothing particularly striking about Ed's appearance except for his calves. He was of medium height and medium build and he had a head of tow hair. It was only his calves that stood out. They were the shape of a large plate. Other than his father and his uncle he only knew a couple of people who had calves like that. When he was in college his friends joked that his legs came from all the time his Celtic ancestors had spent slogging through the bogs. This bit of jocular genetics could not, however, stand up to close scrutiny, because of the two others with similar calves one was Jewish and the other was Greek. Ed himself always assumed that his outsized calves were a product of all the bike riding he did around town.

When Ed got to the camp he sensed right away that there was something pointed in the leaders' attitude toward him but he couldn't figure out what it came from. Whenever it came time to do a chore or learn a camp ritual, the counselors would always take great pains to explain it to Ed in exaggerated detail. One day at lunch Robert the counselor reminded him, "It's your turn to take out the slops today, Ed. Slops go out after supper every evening."

"I know, I know," said Ed.

"Remember the trash barrels are out back of the kitchen under the windows. After supper, tonight. Got it?"

"Sure, sure. Got it," Ed replied.

"You won't forget now, will you?"

"Forget what?" Ed pretended.

But Robert was no dummy and he quickly shut Ed down with a, "don't gimme that—you know what!"

That evening the talk at the supper table was all about the pennant race and the series the Red Sox and Yankees were about to play on the weekend. Apparently, one of the counselors had either got hold of a newspaper or had sneaked in some time listening to the radio. As Ed shuffled out of the dining hall, he stared into an evening haze of famous outfielders, until he caught

sight of the back of Robert's head bobbing down the path ahead of him. "Holy cow!! The slops!! I almost forgot the slops." Ed wheeled round and ran back to the kitchen, where they had only begun the post-supper cleanup, and so no one knew about his close call with disgrace.

On another night though, when it was his turn to take out the slops and when he had nothing at all on his mind, he went right by the kitchen and straight back to the bunk house and only remembered when it was time to clean up for bed. This indiscretion was a great chance for the counselors to bring out their best counseling methodology. "Ed, what in the world were you doing? What in the world were you thinking last night? Or do you really hate taking out the slops so much? Everyone takes a turn, so you can't complain you're being picked on." These were the wise words of counselor Robert, who seemed to be genuinely frustrated by Ed's inability to follow the prescribed routine.

"So, what are we going to do to get you on track here? What are we going to do to make sure you don't wander off again when it's your turn to do the slops? How 'bout cleaning out the horse stalls. That oughta do it." At Camp Windiblo the campers, quite sensibly, dreaded shoveling horse shit out of the stalls more than any other chore. Gray Miss Grogan, the camp's director, knew this well and she designated the stalls as the camp's ultimate penalty.

Outside of his trip to the horse stalls, Ed's life at Camp Windiblo wasn't so bad. He had a buddy or two he already knew and he made some new friends too. And when they weren't pretending to be counselors the counselors weren't such bad people. The main thing that was lacking was baseball. The camp owners, themselves instructors in physical education, knew very well how much young boys liked to play baseball. They knew perfectly well that left to their own devices the boys would play ball all day to the exclusion of all other activities. So ball playing was strictly confined to an occasional co-ed softball game, usually in connection with some sort of all-camp picnic or other festive occasion. In this way the owners made a curious and unintentional reversal of our Puritan ancestors' policy of banning ball playing on Sundays and holidays.

The physical absence of baseball only served to heighten the fervor of Ed's fantastic musings about the game. Ed's view of the natural world was relatively simple: He visualized all open spaces as possible playing fields, preferably for baseball. Trees at the edge of a clearing were nothing more than fences, into or over which one was meant to hit a ball. When for some rea-

son a plot of land turned out to be long and narrow, he could, if pressed, conceive of it as a football field. As the campers traipsed down to the slippery bottomed pond every day for their afternoon swim, Ed would look wistfully at the stuffed archery targets that were standing in what was supposed to be the outfield and people it with players in real uniforms and spikes. What a sacrilege those archery targets were!

Ed could never decide which he liked least, swimming or horseback riding. Splashing around in the slime bottomed pond—one of those New England ponds the color of over-brewed tea—was good survival training but it was no way to learn how to swim. They put out ropes with little flags on them to make lanes, but the pond was too small and the effect was unintentionally parodic. The little dock must have been a good place to fish from for the old farmer who used to own the property, but it was quite useless for swimming. In fact, the pond looked suspiciously like an old watering hole for the farmer's cows.

The summer without ball playing droned on like the cicadas that invaded the camp's oaks and maples. There were only one or two incidents of note that happened to Ed other than the fateful horse killing. Once after gorging on apples at lunch and going on a nature explore Ed was struck with a sudden need to go to the bathroom. For some reason, the counselors wouldn't let him go off on his own in the woods—one of the skills he had actually mastered and brought with him to the camp—and insisted he could make it back to the bunk house in time. They turned out to be wrong though, and Ed wound up shitting himself. Pissing your pants was embarrassing, but at least some of the others did it too. But shitting yourself—that was a lot tougher to deal with, both in the short and long runs. Shitting yourself was a lot more threatening to the delicately balanced pubescent psyche. The counselors, who took no responsibility for their miscalculation, were at least merciful enough not to make Ed shovel out the horse stalls. Instead they gave him extra duty in the kitchen messing around in the slops.

Ed couldn't wait for the camp picnic because they were promised a little softball as one of the games. When it was his turn to hit, it was as though the stuffy night air of the bunkhouse had cleared and been banished forever. Now, finally, he had a chance to do the thing he loved best. All his talk about baseball had inadvertently created a reputation, so naturally the counselors kidded him, calling out, "No hitter. This guy's a no hitter!"

The short stone wall that ran along the back of left field was easily in reach of a good fly ball. In an adrenaline fed frenzy, Ed gave a mighty uppercut at the first ball lobbed to him and topped a little roller toward third base. A furious sprint together with considerable confusion among the fielders enabled him to reach first base safely. His attempt at a heroic, self-vindicating homerun had produced a perfect bunt. He spent the rest of the game stubbing his toes at the newly mown grass in the outfield where the stuffed archery targets usually stood, knowing that he would never get a chance to show off his rifle arm, knowing that at a picnic where everybody gets a turn nobody gets to hit twice.

After the picnic softball game the obligatory period of ritual ribbing ensued in which everyone congratulated Ed for having hit the perfect bunt with a homerun swing. The counselors and the other campers were not as consumed with playing ball as Ed was, however, and they soon moved on to other things. And although he couldn't quite forget his embarrassing at-bat altogether, he managed to overcome his initial mortification. During the last few weeks of camp Ed sought solace in the arts and crafts; he took to carving lots of odd shaped wooden animals. The strangeness of their shape had more to do with his lack of skill than it did with some more profound psychological state. Had he been better at carving, his deer would have looked more like deer than the primordial, bovine creatures he turned out.

The day of the horse killing started out like any other with a splash of bracing cold water, strawberries on cereal, and morning at the crafts center. Horseback riding came after lunch. Ed's steed for the day turned out to be Lazy Daisy, who at thirteen was only a couple of years older than Ed and like him was confined to the horse ring. Daisy's coat, a mottled gray and white, would have been better suited to a cow than a horse, but it was the only one she had.

Unlike the fictional horses of children's stories, Daisy didn't really like children. Near the end of the season, she was particularly tired of the inept, inexperienced riders of Camp Windiblo's novice horse ring. When Ed mounted up that day he found Daisy in an especially balky mood. The riding counselors gave out conflicting advice on how to get Lazy Daisy up to speed. One advocated increased leg activity, while the other was in favor of a more decisive manipulation of the reins. Ed's tentative rein and leg movements neatly canceled each other out. On the second agonizing turn, Daisy simply stopped and lay down in the path. Miraculously, Ed stepped out of

the stirrups in time and wound up standing next to his fallen mount. One of the counselors, a red headed college guy, came up to Ed and said, "What's going on here, Ed? Looks like you've finished old Daisy off. What in the world were you trying to do out there?"

Stunned, Ed mumbled, "I didn't do anything. She just lay down on the ground."

"She sure did, Ed. You must've been giving her a real hard time today. Why don't you tell me what happened," the red head insisted.

"I was just sitting there in the saddle and Daisy was going around the ring. I guess she was going pretty slowly, but she always goes slowly. You saw how she didn't want to go at all today. So after a couple of turns she just lies down on the ground."

"But what were you doing that made her lie down. Horses just don't lie down, you know. There's gotta be some reason."

"I know they don't just lie down, but look, I'm sorry. I didn't do anything. I was just sitting in the saddle like always. She just lay down—that's all there is to it."

When the red head finally let him go, Ed was trembling from nerves and despair. He felt terribly sorry for Daisy but couldn't figure out what he could have done differently. It had all happened so suddenly and so inexplicably. Maybe Daisy had a severe case of indigestion. Or, maybe she hadn't eaten anything at all. Ed was too shaken to realize how lucky he had been to step out of the stirrups on time; that realization would only come much later. He kept running over what had happened in his mind, but there was nothing to fasten on, nothing that told him, you blew it, you should have done this or that.

That night after supper the prematurely gray Miss Grogan, part owner and camp director, had a little chat with Ed. For this particular chat she had adopted an especially strict and accusatory tone. She was insistent that Ed understood that he had done something bad, something wrong. At this stage in his life Ed could not have imagined that this was apparently the camp's party line on the events of the afternoon involving himself and Lazy Daisy. Ed still felt too shaken and too guilty to stand up for himself, so he simply nodded at everything Miss Grogan said. He was desperate to find out what had happened to Daisy though. When he asked gray Miss Grogan about her fate, she told him that Daisy had died. In later years Ed wondered whether she must have been putting him on, but at the time he was too flustered to

figure out whether she was joking or not. In any event, someone decided that Ed would be spending some extra time in the morning shoveling out the horse stalls.

The next day when Ed took a break from his shoveling he looked around for Daisy, but she was nowhere to be found. He consoled himself with the thought that Daisy had been let out to pasture to get a bit of rest. The remainder of the session went by without incident, but Ed never did see Daisy again. Yet, he just couldn't believe she had really died on him out there in the horse ring.

After that summer at Camp Windiblo Ed took special pains never to ride horses again. Whenever he would go on an outing where there might be horseback riding, Ed would make sure to dress in such a way—shorts and sandals—as to preclude the possibility of his riding. On one such college picnic at a state park with rental horses his friends were insistent that he go for a ride with them.

“Come on, Ed, we're all dressed the same as you are. Look at Jimmy there, he's in cutoffs and bare feet and he's going.” With all of his defenses breached, Ed had only one gambit left to play: the story of Lazy Daisy. It was by no means a sure thing, because his friends were nearly all masters of the one liner who could top true tales or tall ones with equal ease. The one liner itself is an especially slippery and capricious little genre that can squirt off in one of two directions; it can either make you a hero or make you a fool. Even its creator often doesn't know until the last instant which fate he has in mind for you.

But Ed was desperate and he had to take a chance, so he told the story of Camp Windiblo and Lazy Daisy. When he got to the place where gray Miss Grogan told him that Daisy had died, he admitted that he wasn't sure whether she had been kidding or not. Immediately, he realized that by confessing the truth he'd made a serious, possibly fatal blunder. Now he was at the mercy of his listeners. Masters of the one liner feed on the gullible and the indecisive the way brown mosquitoes of the northern woods feed on campers and tourists.

“Don't you see, Ed, you crushed her to death with your mighty calves!” Ed's roommate bellowed out. “No horse could stand up to those calves of yours. Just look at them!”

Ed lifted his head up and broke into a broad smile. “You guys go riding. I'll stay here and look after the valuables.”