

On the Waterfront

Mike McCoy

I long for the summer days of youth swimming in the lake, paddling a canoe, sailing on the breeze, and running shirtless on the beach.

Making friends, seeking adventure, having fun, making trouble, and creating memories we share forever.



On the Waterfront

Foreword

When remembering our youth, we easily recite stories of misadventure and harrowing feats but rarely recall the torment of our teenage years; Trying to fit in, learning who we are and where we belong in the world.

When we're young, we don't understand that the pain of our experiences and the struggles we endure are what mold us. We lack perspective, the lens of time, to understand that if we persevere, the dark times will end, and through those struggles, we emerge a fully developed self.

I was thirteen when I faced challenges of self-acceptance, abuse, mortality, and death. It was the best summer of my life and the darkest days I've ever lived, but that summer made me who I am. Promises kept and honored requests have propelled me through life and given me purpose.

After all these years, I'm now prepared to share my story.

On the Waterfront



Chapter One

Mom idled her old blue Chevy Impala in the gravel parking lot just long enough for me to grab my backpack and a well-traveled suitcase borrowed from an aunt. I looked back to see the Impala speeding away in a cloud of dust.

Standing with suitcase in hand, I watched her drive away with my little brother looking out the back window, flipping me off. I'd have to remember to beat him up when I got home.

I wasn't sure why she was in such a hurry. Maybe she was still mad at me. I bet she was glad to be rid of me. I should have been sad, but I wasn't.

The divorce had changed our lives, for the worse. We moved from a modern two-story house in Lake Oswego, an upper middle-class suburb near Portland, to a crappy two-bedroom house in Lebanon, a small Oregon lumber town known for its plywood mills. Mom had followed a man she met in Portland to Lebanon, hoping to snag a new husband. The man's wife was the daughter of a mill owner. That mill produced Lebanite, a hard composite board that made Lebanon famous in the wood products industry. Unfortunately for mom and us, the man had no intention of leaving his rich wife and cushy life. After a short, intense affair, the man dumped mom. With no money to move again, we were stuck in Lebanon.

I don't blame my dad for leaving mom, but he should have known who he married. Maybe I should hate my mom, but I don't. It's just that some people should never get married or have kids.

After the divorce, she was a single mother with two young boys to raise. Mom did little raising. Unless you count the flagpoles of the men, she brought home. She was around and made sure we had food in the house. Other than that, Billy and I had to fend for ourselves. We lived on mac and cheese, and I made burritos from canned chicken and refried beans. I spent my time working odd jobs. Billy watched TV.

We weren't exactly poor, but we never had money. Mom's job didn't pay much, and dad never sent support on time. She yelled a lot. Any little thing could set her off. It didn't help that I was at an age where I gave her grief. She was against most everything I wanted to do. She wouldn't let me go places or spend the night at a friend's house. Mom said we'd have to reciprocate. I knew that meant she didn't want anyone to see what a mess our house was.

The one activity my mother supported was scouting. I don't know if she was hoping I'd get exposed to proper male role models who would make me a better man than my father, or if she just wanted me out of the house. Mom usually wasn't around to drive me to scout meetings, so I had to beg people for rides. I hated that, but she never denied me a camp out or a scout trip.

It was the summer of 1972. The Oregon Trail Council had hired me to work as a staff member at Camp Baker for the summer, a Boy Scout camp near Florence, Oregon. The camp is a couple miles east of the Pacific Ocean and the Oregon Sand Dunes. Camp Baker occupies most of a two-mile long peninsula, a long leg of land that juts into Siltcoos lake like a three-sided island surrounded by water.

I looked forward to that summer. For the first time in my life, I'd be free. Being on staff meant I got to be away from home for eight weeks. Away from my brat of a little brother, away from mom, away from our crappy house and my sad life, just away.

On the Waterfront

It would be a summer full of adventure. I'd meet people and make new friends. No one on staff knew me. I could leave my shitty life behind. I had a fresh chance at being Danny Novak.

Regardless of what I was escaping, money was my primary motivation. I'd earn one hundred and eighty dollars for the summer, double what I'd earn if I picked strawberries and beans all summer. Enough money to buy new school clothes and save the rest.

At thirteen years old, I was the youngest staff member that summer. The minimum age for camp staff was fifteen, but Mr. Henderson at the trail council office said I impressed him with my strong desire to work. He thought I was mature for my age, so he gave me the job.

Being the youngest didn't bother me. I imagined it would be like the spring break camp I'd attended where nobody knew anybody else. All the boys were in the same awkward situation. You made new friends because there was no other choice. My age wasn't a big deal. I'd been to Camp Baker many times for summer camp, winter camp, and spring break, taking every chance I could to get away from home and earn merit badges. Being at camp wasn't new to me. I'd fit in with the other guys in no time. Easy as pie.

Walking down the gravel road, I studied the jagged gray rocks embedded in dark brown mud. I jumped to the raised center of the road, avoiding potholes filled with water and deep ruts that became muddy puddles every time it rained.

I gazed down at my reflection. Dirty blond hair, hazel eyes, and smooth white skin. People, well mostly old ladies and aunts, say I'm handsome. Looking at my reflection in the muddy water, I know people say that as a pleasantry. What do you expect the women to say? "*Mrs. Novak, what a short, skinny child you have. Are you feeding him enough? Don't worry, he'll grow into those ears.*" I don't hate the image that's reflected. It's just that you never know what people really think.

I marveled at the cloudless blue sky and basked in the heat of the sun, absorbing its warmth. Growing up in Oregon, you learn to appreciate the sun because nine months of the year you live under gray overcast skies, the days wet with soggy rain.

The road ahead cut a narrow path through a wall of tall Douglas fir trees running from the parking lot, past the caretakers' home, and the trading post, all the way to the dining hall where the gravel thinned, and the road became a wide trail covered with fresh wood chips.

Smaller trails, like veins off an artery, branched from the road leading to campsites on the east side of the peninsula with names like Tyee and Chinook. On the right side of the road sat the enormous dining hall and beyond that, a grass covered field called the assembly area with a flagpole at the edge of the dark forest.

It felt good to be surrounded by nature, where the air was clean, and everything was green. I didn't care that my mom sped away. Just the day before, I wasn't sure I'd make it here.

I thought about that night. We'd had a fight. Well, it wasn't a fight, and it wasn't an argument. I guess you'd call it a typical night at the Novak residence.

I was sitting on the couch watching Mayberry R.F.D. on our black-and-white TV. The picture was fuzzy. I'd done my best to adjust the reception, holding the antenna in place with a piece of string tethered to the wall with a thumbtack. Mr. Lee was on my lap; the most recent cat mom had brought home. Mr. Lee was a Siamese, which made him unique among our five other cats. My little

On the Waterfront

brother, Billy, two years younger than me, laid on the other end of the couch talking on the phone, stretching the coiled cord across the room.

Mom let out a shriek in the laundry room. Followed by, “Daniel Lacey Novak, get your ass in here.”

Struck with fear, I leaped over the phone cord and bolted across the worn orange shag carpet, to learn what had I done wrong this time. She stood in front of the dryer, holding a wrinkled floral-patterned dress. She flicked her long blond hair out of her face, then lowered her gaze, glaring angrily at me. Her eyelashes were black, thick with mascara and her eyelids painted furious blue.

“What?” I asked.

“You ruined my dress,” she shouted, lifting the wilted fabric for me to see.

“Sorry. I thought I was helping. It was in the washer, so I put it in the dryer for you. Can’t you iron it?”

“No! It’s drip dry. Dammit.”

“I needed to wash my clothes so I can pack for camp.”

“Camp? You might not make it to camp, mister.” She turned away from me and tossed the dress on a bin overflowing with dirty clothes. “Now I need a new dress for... Jim,” she said to herself.

“You have lots of dresses.”

She turned back at me like a viper, hissing. “If you expect me to drive you to camp, you’d better get your chores done.”

“I’ll do ‘em.”

“Do you know how much gas costs these days? You must think money grows on trees.”

“I know it doesn’t,” I mumbled under my breath.

“But you want to go to the movies, you want to go to camp.”

“I work.”

“Finish your chores then, or you’re not going anywhere. You begged me to pay you to do chores, but I have to yell to get anything done. Did you mow the lawn and pick the weeds?”

“Yes.”

“Did you clean the garage?”

“I will in a minute.”

“In a minute. That’s all I hear from you these days.”

I turned around and nearly ran over Billy. “I’ll do it in a minute. Do it in a minute,” he squawked mockingly, looking up at me with his shit brown eyes and pug nose, dark brown hair hung over his eyes. I kned him in his chubby belly. “Get out of my way, lazy ass.”

“Waah! Danny kicked me!” Billy cried.

Mom rushed to him, embracing the brat in a motherly hug, like always. “How many times have I told you not to hit your brother?”

“I barely touched him.”

“Clean the garage,” she screamed at me.

“I’m going.”

“I have a date tonight. The garage better be spotless when I get home, or you can forget your camp.”

I stepped into the piss and shit scented garage slamming the door behind me. Heaps of dog crap and puddles of piss covered the cement floor. Any spot that wasn’t piled with junk was covered with crap. That’s what happens when you have three dogs living in a garage and don’t let them out

On the Waterfront

because it's raining and you're too rattle brained to take care of the dogs, let alone take care of your kids.

The sharp smell stings your nose, but I guess you get used to it. Fact is that smell permeated the house, and our clothes. I hoped mom could find a dress that didn't smell of eau de pew for her date, but I doubted she'd be in her dress for long, anyway.

I grabbed the shit shovel. It had a thick wooden handle with a wide, flat, rusty blade. I aimed for a pile of dog crap mixed with pee. The metal blade scraped across the cement floor. The trick was to scoop hard enough for a clean grab of dog crap, but not so fast that the piss splashed you. It was an acquired skill.

I swung my backpack over one shoulder and ambled along the road to the dining hall. Staff members arrived a week before the summer season began to help get the camp ready and allow the senior staff to train us. I saw a teenage boy sitting at a folding table on the porch of the dining hall. I ran up the steps and stood in front of the table. The older boy stared at me. "I think you're here too early. The boys don't show up till next week."

"I'm Danny Novak. Check your list. I'm on staff," I said, pointing at his roster.

"Huh, I guess so. I didn't know they let kids work in the kitchen. You're in cabin nine." He sorted through papers on the table, then handed me some mimeographed pages. "Here's a map of the camp, and your first week's schedule."

I ran through the grass to the far side of the assembly area, ducked into a dense tunnel of bushes and trees behind the flagpole, then followed a dark trail that led to the west side of the peninsula, far from where campers would stay.

The forests of Camp Baker are old, dark, and damp. Passing through the tunnel of bushes was like entering a dark, ancient land. Dense boughs of tall old-growth trees blocked the sun, shadowing an undergrowth of deep peaty mulch, tangled bushes, Bracken fern, and low-lying Huckleberry covering the forest floor. My legs pushed past fern fronds; their rough swordlike edges looked as if they were left over from the Pleistocene era. Giant roots from stalwart trees with thickly furrowed bark spread over the forest floor and across trails like octopus tentacles, reaching out ready to trip you if you didn't keep your eyes open.

As I walked further, the dark forest floor of bladed fern diminished, transforming into a lustrous bronze carpet of dry pine needles. Walking out of the dark, I felt a sense of wonder as I entered a majestic grove of Sitka Spruce. Saffron beams of sunlight pierced the thin canopy, illuminating the soft golden mat at my feet in a dusky yellow glow.

There was an almost magical feeling as I wandered curiously into an open camp filled with strange cabins sloping slowly to the lake. Music wafted through the trees, the unfamiliar tune, and cheerful rhythm lifted my spirits, compelling a swinging cadence to my step. I felt euphoric. My mood changed by this new beat told me this was going to be a great place to spend the summer.

I viewed the scattered placement of rustic cabins built on raised foundations that leveled the structures on the sloping terrain. The cabins had a framed wood door with a spring that slammed closed with a loud *whack*. Wooden walls of the cabins went only halfway up. The high roof and upper walls were open rafters covered with weathered gray canvas, reminding me of wagon trains on the Oregon trail.

On the Waterfront

Checking my map, I walked to a guy with dark bushy hair and dark stubble on his face sitting on the steps of his cabin smoking a cigarette. He looked old enough to be in college. I asked him where cabin number nine was; he pointed without looking. That's when I noticed several of the cabins were decorated. I was awestruck by the novelty. One cabin had a Hawaiian theme with colorful paper luau girls and a string of paper pineapples draped over the entry. The next cabin had red and green Christmas lights outlining the door, and a small silver glitter Christmas tree mounted on the roof. Outside another, a wheelbarrow sat filled with books and a floor lamp. I watched as a boy carried an armchair up the steps.

In front of the cabins, a solitary picnic table made of thick, gray, weathered wood sat among the trees. Crisscrossed strings of light bulbs hung over the table. The wires, decorated with multicolored swatches of cloth, looked like Himalayan prayer flags.

Walking further into camp, I discovered the source of the music. An Asian boy sat on the steps of his cabin playing a guitar, singing along with a record. I waved, but the boy acted like he didn't see me. I'd never heard Reggae music before that day, but later learned the boy was singing with Bob Marley.

When I opened the door to cabin number nine, my jaw dropped. There were posters of hot chicks and topless Playboy models covering the walls. At the far end of the cabin, there was a large lumpy red ball on the floor, and a popcorn maker on an overturned wooden box. The cabin had bunk beds on both sides with a broad wooden floor between them. I heard hammering and looked up to the rafters. A boy was nailing the last corner of a large black flag adorned with a multicolored peace symbol that canopied the room.

"Welcome to party central, I'm Eric," he said, standing high above on a wooden beam. He gazed down at me with thin, stringy auburn hair hanging over brown eyes and a welcoming smile.

I stood in the doorway with my mouth hanging open.

"Don't worry. There's plenty of room for your stuff. What'd you bring? Did you leave your stuff outside? I'll help you get it."

I lifted my suitcase and shrugged.

"A suitcase? That's it? What've you got in there?"

I stepped forward and the wooden door *smacked* closed behind me. "Clothes."

Eric's enthusiasm evaporated. He stepped from the wood beam down to the top bunk, then jumped, landing with a heavy thud on the cabin's wood floor.

He sized me up. "You're short."

"I'm five foot one and a half."

Eric suddenly looked angry. "Doesn't matter how tall you are. If you didn't bring anything for the cabin, you can't bunk with me. Git. Find your own place."

His words struck me like a lightning bolt. My eyes stung. I took a deep breath, hitched the strap of my backpack, turned, and pushed the spring-loaded door open to leave.

"Psych." Eric laughed. I stepped out the door. "Stop. I was kidding."

I turned on the step and faced the boy, studying the freckles covering his nose, the freshly popped zit on his chin, and his peach fuzzed cheeks.

Eric smiled. "You can't leave. You're stuck with me. I tried to change cabin mates last year, but senior staff wouldn't let me. We'd practically have to kill each other before they'd let us change."

Eric's words didn't make me feel better.

He extended his arm, pushing the door open. "Take a chill pill, man. Come inside."

On the Waterfront

Reluctantly, I stepped in.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Fifteen. I just got my driving permit. I’m saving up to buy a car. My dad said he’d pitch in, but I need to come up with some cash.”

Eric let the door slam behind me. “I hope you like what I did with the place.”

“Yeah. It’s off the hook,” I said sheepishly.

“It’s all about making the place your own. I saw one guy setting up a stereo system with gigantic speakers, and Dennis, you’ll meet him later, brought a black light. Man, this summer’s gonna rock.”

“Nobody told me we’re supposed to bring stuff.”

I didn’t know what I would have brought even if I had known. I didn’t own any topless posters or a flag with a peace symbol. Even if I did, my mom would have thrown a fit if I filled her car with a bunch of crap.

“Our cabin isn’t as funky as the other guys, but it’s not bad.”

I looked up and saw a beautiful model wearing a tiny pink bikini, smiling at me, and my heart lightened.

“Yeah. not bad,” I mouthed.

“Hey. You gotta be able to take a joke, man. Nobody’s gonna cut you any slack around here. What’s your name, anyway?”

“I’m Danny. Danny Novak. I’m from Lebanon. Where do you live?”

“Eugene. I’ve heard of Lebanon. Never been there.”

I laid my backpack and suitcase on the empty bunk.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing to the red lumpy ball on the floor.

Eric stepped to the big round lump and fell backward, landing with a soft whoosh as the ball formed around his body. “Haven’t you seen a bean bag chair before?”

“I have now.”

Eric stood and fluffed the ball. “You try it.”

I moved to the ball, closed my eyes, and fell back, landing with a soft smush. Lying in the chair, I felt a thousand crunchy little foam balls beneath me, making squishy plastic sounds as I moved.

“That is so cool. Where’d you buy all this stuff, anyway? You’d never find a chair like this at G.C. Murphy’s Five and Dime.”

Eric looked at me like I was an idiot. “The mall, dimwit.”

“We don’t have an indoor shopping mall that sells bean bags or posters of hot chicks in Lebanon.”

“You don’t say indoor shopping mall, dipshit. It’s just *the mall*. I go all the time.”

“Do you have anything else to set up?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“I’ve got an American flag. You can help me mount it on the wall over your bunk.”

“OK,” I said, climbing to the top bunk.

Eric tossed the flag up to me, then climbed up.

“I hope you’re ready to have some fun. Like I said, this summer is gonna rock!”

That afternoon, I felt unprepared and late for the event. The other guys were a lot older, and it seemed like they’d been at camp for days, but it was the first afternoon.

Chapter Two

The dining hall, the largest building at Camp Baker, was monumental. Its central location and the fact that every camper ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the dining hall brought everyone at Camp Baker together. The building, painted mud brown and trimmed in forest ranger green, looked like it belonged in the forest.

Thick wooden steps stretched across the front of the building that led to a broad porch. The entrance to the grand hall was two sets of double doors, straddling a wide stone chimney built from a jigsaw of mismatched gray rocks held in place with thick mortar.

Late that first afternoon, I stepped into the big, bright dining room with high ceilings supported by varnished log beams. Summer sunlight shined through large glass windows that lined the walls, giving the room a golden glow. Rows of long tables and wood benches separated by a center aisle filled the room. Behind the far wall was the kitchen.

To enter the kitchen, you passed through a swinging door that was next to a long rectangular opening in the wall framed in stainless steel through which we served meals to hungry scouts' cafeteria style. The swinging door intrigued me. I'd seen them in movies and comedy sketches on TV, but I'd never seen one in real life.

I pushed the door. It swung forward, making a *thunk-thunk* sound as it passed the door jamb. Its hinges rocked with the change in direction, coiling the springs with tension. The door swung back with less force, almost reaching my hand before it swung back, settling in the doorway. I pushed the door harder, and the door swung wider.

A woman's voice growled from the kitchen, "Care to join us?" Her brusque words startled me. When the door swung to me, I pushed it wide enough to step through before the heavy door swept behind me; *thunk-thunk, thunk-thunk*. I spotted a large woman with coiffed yellow hair wearing a white apron over a light blue dress. Four other adults wearing white kitchen uniforms flanked her. I walked slowly toward a group of boys, who were all staring at me. Each of them, taller and older than me.

I waved. "Hi. I'm Danny Novak."

The woman looked at me. "You must be the runt of the litter." The boys laughed. "Aren't we expecting one more?" she asked.

"Eric's on the way," I said, scanning the large room filled with stainless-steel tables, an industrial oven, a heavy-looking door to a walk-in cooler, a gas stove, and other kitchen equipment, all surrounded by pale yellow walls that reminded me of margarine.

The large woman put her hands on her hips. "We're gonna feed lots of hungry boys this summer. Just you wait, you'll see," she said as Eric slipped through the swinging door. "You do not want to be on my bad side, isn't that right, Eric Turner?"

"No Mom, sorry. Won't happen again," Eric said, looking at the woman with large puppy dog eyes.

"She's your mom? I asked as Eric shuffled over to me and the other boys.

"No." Eric huffed.

On the Waterfront

“For those who don’t know, I’m Mrs. Garrett. This is my kitchen. The adults standing next to me are the cook staff. Do as we say, and you’ll get along just fine.” The woman said with a stern look on her doughy face.

A tall skinny blonde guy with pimples covering his face leaned down. “Her bark is worse than the bite. We all call her mom. I’m James.” The boy towered over me, standing six foot two inches tall. His arms were long and gangly, and he had a huge Adam's apple poking out of his long neck.

“You can call me mom if you work hard and follow instructions. You might just have some fun if you all work together. Eric and James were here last summer and know how the kitchen works. I’m depending on you two to help train the new boys.”

“You got it mom,” said Eric.

James nodded and swallowed. The way his Adam's apple moved up and down his neck, I imagined his head was about to fall back like a Pez dispenser. I put my fingers to my throat, swallowed, and felt only a slight bump.

“Jerry didn’t come back this summer?” Eric asked mom.

James spoke up before mom could answer. “You mean Jerry the fairy? Does Eric miss his boyfriend?”

Mom folded her arms and gave James a stern look. “We will have none of that in my Kitchen. You boys were so cruel to that sweet boy. It’s no wonder he didn’t come back.”

Mom walked across the kitchen to a set of deep stainless-steel sinks installed below windows on the far wall.

“This week we only feed the camp staff, so it will be light duty while you learn the ropes. Everyone will help with serving and cleaning. James will assign your clean up duties.” Mom, then went to the stove and the cook staff returned to preparing the evening meal.

I stood off to the side as the other boys begged James for the simple jobs. “Eric and I will wipe down the dining tables and counters,” James announced. I assumed that was the easiest job. Eric pointed at a husky guy with dark brown hair and scruffy sideburns. “What’s your name?”

The boy stood stiffly. “I’m Kurt.”

“Kurt’s in charge of the Beast. That’s the dishwashing machine.”

James walked to the dishwasher and set a green plastic tray on the stainless counter. “You load the trays with plates, spray them down with the nozzle, then push them into the Beast.”

The beast was a stainless-steel box housing the dishwashing apparatus. You lifted a metal bar to raise the steel box, opening the beast, slid in a tray of dirty dishes, pulled the bar down to close it, then pushed a button. The beast groaned and throbbed, spinning high-pressure pipes, spraying the plates with soap and hot water. When the wash cycle ended, you lifted the handle, releasing billowing clouds of hot steam and slid in another tray that pushed the clean tray out the other side, pulled the handle down, and repeat.

Eric stepped toward me. “You’re too short for that job.”

James then pointed to an attractive boy with thick blond hair that swept over his eyebrows. He had soft white skin, rosy cheeks, and an easy smile. “Who are you?”

“Tony.”

“You’ll sweep and mop the kitchen floor.”

Bruce would unload the dishwasher and stack the plates and bowls. He was tall but so thin and pale he looked ill. Bruce had long black hair cut in a style that looked like he was the lead singer of a rock band, and he wore a Black Sabbath t-shirt.

On the Waterfront

I was the last one selected. Eric looked at James. “What have we got left? There’s got to be a job for Danny.”

James looked thoughtful for a moment. “I know what we forgot.”

“The pot and pan scrubber,” Eric and James said in unison.

“It’s the best Job,” Eric said sarcastically. I could tell by the way he said it, scrubbing grimy pots and pans was absolutely the worst job in the kitchen. I had a sinking feeling that I’d spend my entire summer elbow deep in large metal pots scrubbing off half burned crud.

Mom barked instructions for us to place deep stainless-steel pans loaded with food into the heated serving table on the kitchen side of the rectangular window. We then used large metal spoons to pile food on the camp staff’s plates as they slid past. The window wasn’t tall enough to see people’s faces unless you leaned down, so we filled faceless plates on trays that moved along a Formica shelf on the other side of the window. Once everyone was served, we filled our own plates and walked into the dining hall with our trays.

All the camp staff sat grouped together, filling only four tables in the expansive dining room. Some of them wore scout uniforms, which I thought strange since there were no boys at camp. Eric and I searched for empty seats.

“What do all these guys do?” I asked.

“Half of these guys were here last year. That weird looking guy over there teaches ecology. The blond guy with a mustache is Jack. He runs the archery range. The guy with the beard next to him teaches woodworking,” Eric said, nodding to people.

I noticed a group of older teens at a far table wearing white t-shirts with red Camp Baker logos. “Who are those guys?” I asked.

“Waterfront staff. They’ve got the coolest jobs. They hang out in the sun, swim, and paddle boats all day.”

“I’d like to do that.”

“Forget about it. You’re too small. Those guys would drown you.”

As Eric and I walked with our trays, I introduced myself to each table. “Hi, I’m Danny,” I said to the first table. “Howdy, I’m Danny Novak,” I said to the second table. “Hey, I’m Dan —.”

“Are you a ditz?” Eric said, interrupting me.

“I’m being friendly.”

“Well, stop it. People will think you’re a retard.”

Eric saw someone he knew and quickly sat down. He looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry last seat, nimrod.”

I walked to the next table. It was the table of waterfront guys. I stood at the end. “Hey guys, I’m Danny. You have room for one more?” A chubby guy scooted to fill a gap on the bench.

“I didn’t think the kids showed up till next week,” one guy said.

“This table is for big boys,” said another.

Adult staff sat at the last table. I didn’t want to be the pitiful, dorky kid who sits with the adults. That would be worse than sitting alone.

I turned, walked back across the tiled floor holding my tray, and kicked the swinging door open. I stood at the heated serving table and ate alone, watching the others through the rectangular window as they ate, talked, and laughed.

While I was peering through the window, Mom walked up behind me and rubbed her hand on my back. “You’re Danny, right?”

On the Waterfront

I nodded. Her hand felt warm, soft, and comforting.

“Don’t you worry, hon. Boys are mean to each other. It’s part of growing up. In a few days, you’ll be running with the pack.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. You’ll see.”

After dinner was over and the kitchen cleaned, Eric and I walked back to our cabin.

Eric looked at me quizzically. “Why did you introduce yourself to everybody?”

“I was being friendly. If you want to make friends, it pays to be friendly.”

“No, it doesn’t. It makes you look desperate. Nobody should try that hard to make friends.”

I stared, studying Eric for a moment. “Were you and Jerry friends? Is that why you asked about him?”

“We shared a cabin. Last year I got a fag. This year I get a putz. Cabin mates suck.”

That first day wasn’t what I’d expected. Being on staff wasn’t like spring break camp. Lots of the guys already knew each other. They already had friends, and I didn’t know anybody. Eric thought I was a dimwit or a dipshit who didn’t know anything. Camp was supposed to be my chance for a new start, to fit in, and have fun, but I felt more out of place than ever. At that moment, I ached to be back home.

On the Waterfront